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As the battle again raged on, of the English, a ... tried slowly back to the ...

THE HEIR

BY

SYDNEY C. GRIER

AUTHOR OF

'AN UNCROWNED KING,' 'THE WARDEN OF THE MARCHES,'
ETC.

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THE HEIR.

CHAPTER I.

DE JURE.

"I REALLY feel quite guilty," said the Master of St Saviour's College to the distinguished foreigner whom he was escorting to the Senate House. "Your time in Cambridge is so short that every moment must be needed for your work."

"Pray do not reproach yourself, sir," replied Professor Panagiotis, with the deliberate precision of one who has learned English from books. "What greater honour could be afforded me than permission to observe the contests of your youthful heroes for the rewards of poetry and oratory?"

"You mustn't expect too much," said the Master, with some anxiety; "though if it had been merely the usual recitation of prize exercises, I should have left you in peace in the Library. But the subject of the English Poem has such a close connection with that of your great book—not, of course, that it was intentionally chosen; merely a coincidence," he added conscientiously—"that I felt you ought to be present."

"I am entirely agreed with you," responded the author of the famous German work on the fall of the Eastern Empire, wondering why his host was so determined not to let him see a compliment where none was meant. "The subject, then, is historical?"

"The Fall of Czarigrad," replied the Master, "and the medal has come to a St Saviour's man, which has not happened for many years. I understand that he studied your book very carefully before writing his poem, and that is my reason for dragging you here."

It was in the Professor's mind to wish that his book had not been studied, as he sat in the Senate House and heard various agitated young men, their faces vying sometimes with the white of the M.A. hoods and sometimes with the Doctors' scarlet, declaim compositions in various languages, with all the grace and dignity to be expected from extreme nervousness subject to the perpetual encouragement of well-meaning friends. Latin the Professor despised, and the Cambridge Greek, from the difference of pronunciation, he scarcely recognised as his own language, but the English Poem roused in him a certain amount of interest, though he felt a mighty longing to relieve the author of the task of reciting it. The medallist was fortunate in being pale, and not red, for Professor Panagiotis considered blushing a purely feminine exercise, but he shared with his fellows the English incapacity for letting himself go. In his most thrilling passages the note of shamed self-consciousness was clearly audible, and he endured the applause accorded him with a stolid resignation that seemed to inquire why he could not be allowed to perform a distasteful duty in peace. This was the more irritating to Professor Panagiotis because the poem, whenever he could catch the words, struck

him as remarkable. The author had chosen as his theme the final day in the long struggle of the Cross against the Crescent, when the Moslem tide overflowed at last the grand bulwark of Christendom, and the Emperor John Theophanis fell fighting as a common soldier in the breach. The recital was placed in the mouth of the Emperor, and the description of the night's vigil, the dawn of the fatal day, the fanatic fury of the assault, the desertion of the Christian cause by its allies, and the last desperate fight, into which Theophanis was to hurl himself, determined to perish, impressed the listener with a curious sense of realism. He had lived for months and years among the records of these scenes, but he could not have described them with the sure hand of this undergraduate. The tale was plain and unvarnished, the telling crude and bald, but as the fragmentary lines, unassisted by any rhetorical graces in the reciter, reached the hearer, he felt such a thrill as the unadorned narrative of an eyewitness might produce. The young man must be a poet of quite unusual power, and Professor Panagiotis forgot the manuscripts awaiting him at the Library in the determination to cultivate his acquaintance.

"But, my dear friend, you have a genius there!" he cried, when the Master rejoined him at the close of the ceremony. "Who is this poet of yours, whose name I could not hear on account of the noise of the envious relatives of his fellow-students?"

An irrepressible smile crossed the Master's face, but he answered with all gravity. "Teffany—Maurice Teffany—a third-year man. He goes down next week, after he has taken his degree."

"Teffany! *Himmel und Erde*, is it possible?" cried the Professor. "And yet I might have known. The

thing is the most extraordinary coincidence! Pardon me," as his host looked at him in surprise, "but I have associations with the name. I am all interest. He is the pride of the college, this young man?"

"Not at all," said the Master, laughing. "In fact, it's a curious case. Teffany has always been rather a puzzle to me. He is not what you would call a popular man, but he has exercised a good deal of influence in a quiet way. I must confess I found him a little disappointing, especially in comparison with his sister, a very clever girl. She used to attend my lectures with other Girtham students, and did extremely good work for me, showing a distinct capacity for original research. Teffany worked well, but in a plodding, uninspired sort of way. I was always irritated by the feeling that we had never yet hit on his special line."

"But now—since this poem—you can have no doubt?" asked Professor Panagiotis quickly.

The Master shook his head. "I am still doubtful," he said. "I asked his tutor to find out whether he had done anything else in the poetical line—one would expect reams of amateur verse, you know—but there was not a scrap. He had never written verses before, and he seems to have no wish to do it again."

"The young man interests me," said the Professor. "His name alone——" he stopped abruptly, as though he had changed his mind. "Quite independently of his name, I mean."

"Ah, of course, his subject would appeal to you," said the Master unsuspectingly. "You would like to meet him, perhaps? I will invite him to dine with us to-night. He has reflected honour on the college, and I shall be glad to mark my sense of it."

At dinner that evening Professor Panagiotis scanned his neighbour narrowly whenever he found an opportunity. To him, as to the Master, the young man was a disappointment. He was extraordinarily ordinary. Neither tall nor short, neither dark nor fair, neither foppish nor careless, neither talkative nor silent, he seemed in no way distinguished or distinguishable. It was only on comparing him with the other guests that the Professor arrived at a conclusion which gave him something of a shock. There was a strength and decision about the jaw and chin which did not amount to obstinacy, but suggested that the owner might be difficult to turn aside, and a steady calmness about the eyes which bespoke an indisposition to be hurried.

"The worst type in the world to manage!" was the Professor's inward groan. "I must do what I can to gain his confidence, but I foresee it will be necessary to approach him through the brilliant sister."

Presently Maurice Teffany found himself addressed by the distinguished guest, the great Greek man of letters who had made his German university famous all over the world. His previous silence, coupled with his keen glances, had made him appear somewhat formidable, but he now talked pleasantly enough, and the young man became confidential on the subject of the prize poem, which he seemed to his questioner to regard as a huge joke.

"It's an utter fraud, my getting the medal," he said. "It ought to have gone to my sister—or perhaps to you, sir. My sister was awfully keen on my trying for it, because there were a lot of old books about Czarigrad which we were very fond of as children, but I hadn't the slightest idea of it. Then this last winter I sprained my ankle badly at

the very beginning of the vac.—only about six weeks before the poems had to be sent in—and couldn't get out, and she gave me no peace. She had your book, and she translated all the most thrilling bits and read them to me, and then—well, it got hold of me somehow, and I seemed to know all about it. So I just wrote it down, and she criticised it, and copied it out for me, and it got the medal! The Master says it's brutal and rugged and everything that a poem ought not to be, but that there's *vision* in it—whatever he may mean by that."

"And you agree with him?"

"Oh, I suppose so. Anyhow, he's sure to know the right thing to say. You see, sir, I don't feel that I wrote it. It just came—as if I had been there and seen it. My sister and I always call it 'The Finest Story in the World' between ourselves—but perhaps you don't know Kipling?"

"I fear not, if you allude to some English writer on the subject of reincarnation. But I am going to ask you a rude question on a point of psychology. Is it possible that the poem was actually your sister's composition, but that she impressed it upon your mind, so that you accepted and wrote it as your own?"

Young Teffany considered the matter gravely, and then laughed. "Rather not!" he said. "Zoe's an awfully clever girl, and writes a good bit, but she has never dabbled in poetry any more than me. She was just as much surprised at the way the thing turned out as I was. And as to making her poem pass into my mind without my knowing it—why, she couldn't do it. I'm as certain of that as I am of anything, though I think a lot of her—but of course I don't tell her so."

"My dear sir, you have already grasped one of the

main secrets of the management of the female sex," said the Professor sententiously. "But may I suggest a variation of your reincarnation theory? I am at present engaged in following up my larger work by tracing the dispersal of the Greeks who survived the fall of Czarigrad, and it occurs to me that your family may be descended from one of them."

He scanned his companion's face closely, as though to discover whether the idea was new to him, but the young man only laughed. "A case of inherited memory? I'm afraid it's no go, sir. There's nothing in the least Greek about us."

"Four centuries of English marriages would go far to obliterate racial traits," was the dry reply. "Your Christian name is Greek, at any rate."

"All our names are. It's a kind of tradition in the family. My father was Theodore, and his father and grandfather were both Constantine. However far back you go, it's always Basil and Gregory and so on for the men, and Dorothea and Katharine and James of that sort for the women."

"That is very curious," with repressed eagerness. "And you are sure there is no tradition of a Greek ancestry?"

"None that I know of. But my sister would be a better person to ask. She's had flu., you know, with a touch of bronchitis, or else she'd have been here to-day, and she said she was going to forget her sorrows in rummaging among the family papers. There are a few at home, and some at the lawyer's. But really, I'm afraid there's not much to find out. We have only been settled at our present place for sixty or seventy years—horribly new, you see."

"Then where was your family established before that?" The Professor leaned forward anxiously.

"Oh, somewhere in the wilds of Cornwall. My grandfather could just remember the old place. My sister and I talk sometimes of making a pilgrimage down there—seeking the cradle of our race, you know—but I believe it's only a farmhouse now."

"The cradle of your race!" with measureless contempt. "My dear Mr Teffany"—the Professor modified the eagerness of his tone as his hearer looked at him in astonishment—"I must see those papers—any family relics you may possess. What this identification, if it is established, may mean to me—to you—I hardly dare think. I—I had traced the family of which I am in search as far as Penteffan on the Cornish coast, and there all sign of them was lost. This is like new life to me. You will not refuse your help?"

"Of course, we shall be glad to do anything we can," was the reply, given without effusion. "Penteffan was the name of my great-grandfather's place, certainly. We have a picture of it—'The Seat of Constantine Teffany, Esq.' Will you come down with me next week, and look over the papers with my sister—if you are not afraid of the flu?"

"No, no; I have paid toll to the devil," replied the Professor hurriedly. His hearer interpreted the somewhat startling assertion correctly as referring to the influenza-fiend, and they proceeded to discuss ways and means. It was settled at last that Maurice should go home the next week, as he had intended, and obtain the papers of which his lawyer had charge, and that the Professor, who was to receive an honorary degree from the University, should follow as soon as possible, when they would go through the documents together.

"Maurice, an awful blow!" Zoe Teffany sprang

up to meet her brother as he put his head in at the door of the library where she was at work. "I believe our name is really Smith!"

"That's cheerful. What makes you think so?"

"Why, I was tidying the top shelves of the book-cases, and I found a lot of grandpapa's old school-books, and every one of them had 'C. Smith' or 'Constantine Smith' inside. Then I remembered those old letters of great-grandmamma's—about buying this place, you know—and when I looked at them they were all addressed to 'Mrs Smith.' The address was written in the middle of one side of the paper, in the old way—there were no envelopes—and I had not noticed it when I saw them before."

"What a frightful sell for Professor Panagiotis!" chuckled Maurice. "Shall we wire, and put the old fellow out of his misery?"

"Oh no, no! Why, it mayn't be true; we'll hope it isn't. I have been looking at everything else I can think of, to try and be certain one way or the other, and I can only find the name Smith just when grandpapa was a boy. His parents were Teffany before he was born, and we know he was Teffany when we knew him. What can it mean?"

"Well, since he was a small boy at school when he called himself Smith, it can hardly mean that he had done something and was in hiding. There's one piece of comfort for you, at any rate. But I tell you what, I'll ask old Lake, when I ride over tomorrow to get the papers. He ought to know, if any one does."

"Oh, do; and be sure and hurry back. I shall be dying to know. I hope there's some romantic reason, at any rate. Smith is such a terribly unromantic name. Couldn't you go to-day?"

"Scarcely, since my appointment with Lake is for to-morrow."

"Oh, how prosaic you are—talking of appointments, when you ought to saddle your fleetest steed and spur him headlong over hill and dale to discover the truth!"

"Ah, I'm not a budding novelist, you know."

"No, only a full-blown tragic poet." Zoe raised her voice as Maurice beat a hasty retreat. The varying literary fortunes of the two afforded endless opportunity for mutual chaff, but whereas Zoe gloried in her abortive efforts at fiction, on the ground that they were too good for any publisher to accept, Maurice was inclined to be ashamed of his success. The romantic was Zoe's province, not his, and the only excitement he felt over her momentous discovery was due to the possible disappointment in store for Professor Panagiotis, for whom he had conceived a certain distrust, due to his mysterious hints and half-revelations. There was no enthusiasm, therefore, in his tone when he entered the library on the following afternoon.

"Well," he said, "our name is Teffany all right. I have interviewed old Lake, and you may sleep in peace. There was a reason for the Smith business, and I suppose you would call it romantic. I call it cracked."

"Oh, do tell me!" cried Zoe. "Was it a feud?"

"Nobody knows. Lake could only tell me what his father told him, and what they guessed. His father had just gone into the office when our great-grandmother and her little boy arrived in the neighbourhood about seventy years ago. She had excellent bankers' references, and began to negotiate for the purchase of this place. She told them that she was left sole guardian of her son, and that she had been

obliged to remove from her former part of the country on account of grave dangers threatening his life. For safety's sake, they would be known for the present by the name of Smith. She was a handsome woman, and the Lakes thought there must be some revengeful discarded lover in the case. She bought this place and lived here unmolested, and when her son was twenty-one, he resumed the name of Teffany, which the lawyers heard then for the first time. At the same time, he sold Penteffan, which had been managed by a London firm. He would have liked to go back there, but his mother objected so vehemently that he humoured her, especially since the old house had been allowed to fall into decay. The Lakes could never discover anything to account for her horror of the place, except that the people remembered two foreigners coming and making inquiries about the family soon after she left. That's absolutely all they know."

"Oh, Maurice, how thrilling!" cried Zoe, drawing a long breath. "Do you think the house was haunted? or—no, I am sure it was smugglers. Perhaps she had betrayed them to the revenue officers, and they meant to kidnap her child in revenge. I wonder if there's anything about it in the papers you have brought. Shall we look at them now?"

"No, nonsense! Leave them till the Professor comes. Let's go and see how the new croquet-lawn is getting on."

The Professor arrived the next day, casting keen, curious glances about him. The sober stateliness of the house, the old family servants, the unobtrusive perfection of every detail indoors and out, and the easy kindliness of the young master and mistress—all were, so to speak, noted in his memory and labelled

for reference. He remarked also Zoe's unconcealed eagerness for the hour when the family papers were to be examined, and the tolerant resignation with which Maurice awaited it. He would find the motive force in the sister, the staying power in the brother, he assured himself again.

"This is what will interest you most, I expect," said Maurice, when they had retired to the library after dinner, unrolling a long parchment scroll as he spoke. "It is our family tree, properly drawn out."

Professor Panagiotis peered at the document with a hungry look. "You are right," he said; "it is priceless. Your family has dwindled strangely, Mr Teffany. I cannot tell you how many collateral branches I have followed up, only to find that they died out, while the direct line was in existence unknown to me."

"Yes, my sister and I are the sole representatives of the name, as far as this pedigree shows," said Maurice.

"Exactly—so far as this pedigree shows," agreed the guest, comparing the document with the entries in a note-book which he had brought with him.

"Oh, Maurice, look!" cried Zoe. "Isn't it funny? Do you see that the beginning of the parchment is sealed down? There must be some secret charge, or something of that sort, inside."

"Lake said that our grandfather sealed it in his presence," returned Maurice. "But it must have been sealed a good many times before, to judge by all the old seals."

"Oh dear, I hoped it would reveal the mystery!" sighed Zoe. The Professor looked up sharply.

"My sister gave us a great fright two days ago," explained Maurice. "It appears that my grandfather



and his mother adopted the name of Smith for about fifteen years after they moved here from Penteffan."

"Indeed?" with growing excitement. "This gives me my last link, explains the one fact for which I could not account—the sudden and absolute disappearance of the Teffanys from Penteffan seventy-two years ago. I could find no record of the death of the widow of the last proprietor and her infant son, and yet I could not succeed in tracing them."

"Then you know who the foreigners were who made inquiries?" "Then you can explain why she called herself Smith?" burst from Maurice and Zoe simultaneously.

"I can explain it now. The foreigners were delegates from the Greek National Assembly, seeking a leader whose very name would rally round him the contentious factions that disgraced the cause of liberty, each fighting for its own hand. The widowed Mrs Teffany, herself the daughter of an Englishman who had fallen in the cause of Greece, had too little faith in that cause to devote her son to it, and removed him effectually out of sight."

"But why should they want a little boy of five, who couldn't even fight?" cried Zoe. "It wasn't as if he was a king."

"He would have been proclaimed king, doubtless. It was not the person, so much as the name, that was of importance."

"But why the name? Is there something we don't know? Is it here, under these seals?"

"Possibly." The Professor cast a side glance at Maurice. "Mr Teffany desires me to continue?"

"Yes, yes!" cried Zoe, as Maurice nodded. "Tell us, quick!"

She seized the parchment, but the Professor removed

it from her hands. "It is your brother's right," he said. "He is the head of the house. You observe that the pedigree goes back to Alexius Teffany, who settled in Cornwall in the sixteenth century. Now break the seals, sir, if you please. You observe that Alexius was the son of John, who was the son of Manuel, who was the son of Basil——"

"Who was the son of John Theophanis, Roman Emperor, who died gloriously on the walls of Czarigrad!" shrieked Zoe. "Oh, Maurice, isn't it splendid?"

"That is not all," said Professor Panagiotis. "You, Maurice Teffany, are at this moment the rightful Emperor of the East."

CHAPTER II.

OF THE STOCK OF THE EMPERORS.

"OH, Maurice!" gasped Zoe, almost voiceless in her excitement.

"Well," said Maurice, perhaps with greater carelessness than he felt, "it sounds very nice, but plenty of people are the rightful something or other, and it makes no difference to practical politics. Besides, there's almost certain to be some flaw."

"Flaw!" cried the Professor, "no flaw is possible. Here is the table of your descent, as kept by your family, agreeing exactly with that which I have compiled from old local histories and the registers and monuments at Penteffan. Every member of the family in direct descent is buried there, except one."

"And there the chain breaks, I suppose?" said Maurice.

"By no means, sir. The missing Nicholas is buried in Westminster Abbey. Doubtless he died when on a visit to London."

"Westminster Abbey!" breathed Zoe softly. "Think of having a relation buried there, and not knowing it!"

"This will interest you," said the Professor, passing her a paper. It was the copy of a seventeenth-century entry in a marriage register, and she read the name of the bride aloud.

“‘*Eugenia Theophanes, de stirpe imperatorum.*’ Oh, and that——”

“That is what you are,” said the Professor, with a bow.

“*Zoe Theophanes, de stirpe imperatorum,*” she murmured under her breath.

“Don’t be estatic, Zoe,” said Maurice sharply. “What difference can it make, our knowing this? It’s quite clear that our grandfather knew it, and it made no difference to him.”

“Yes, he knew it,” agreed Professor Panagiotis, glancing from the pedigree on the table to the decorations of the room, in which the family crest, a golden eagle with its feet resting on two gates, was unobtrusively repeated again and again. Zoe had been her grandfather’s assistant in designing the frieze and the carvings of the high mantelshelf, little guessing the meaning attaching to them in the old man’s mind, or that the two gates were those of Rome and of Czarigrad.

“He spent his life quietly here, doing his duty to his tenants,” persisted Maurice, as though combating something that had been said.

“He did,” responded the Professor; “but when he reached manhood, and learned for the first time of his lofty ancestry, the present kingdom of Morea had long been established under a German prince. In the crisis of 1862, his countrymen, ignorant of his existence, made no attempt to summon him to their head, and a constitutional reticence—resembling, shall I say, that of his grandson?—withheld him from putting himself forward, so that the crown passed without opposition to the present Cimbrian ruler.”

“I presume you are not suggesting that I should deprive King William of Morea of his throne?” asked Maurice, with an angry laugh.

"No," said the Professor emphatically. "The Morean kingdom, grievously as it has disappointed the hopes fixed upon it, may be disregarded until the day comes for it to take its place among the federal States of the revived Empire. It is Unredeemed Greece which claims your attention—the only portion of Europe still groaning under the Roumi yoke."

"I see; you are an Emathian agitator," was the chilling answer.

"I am and I am not," replied the Professor. "I am an Emathian Greek, cherishing warm hopes of the deliverance of my country; but I have nothing in common with those bands of miscreants which, financed and directed by interested committees in Thracia and Dardania, have brought the name of Emathia into discredit throughout Europe by their wholesale assassinations. I hold them in the utmost detestation. Even the Roumis are less to be feared."

"No connection with any one else in the same line of business," murmured Maurice. "Surely," he observed aloud, "you would do better if you could unite into one body all who had the same object in view? Then you could moderate the Balkan passion for assassination, and they would bring you a welcome accession of numbers and money."

Professor Panagiotis laughed bitterly. "Your words prove that you share the usual English ignorance of the state of affairs in Emathia," he said. "To the schismatic Thracians and Dardanians, an Orthodox Christian is equally hateful with a Roumi, and the same treatment is meted out to him."

"A pleasant prospect for the future!" said Maurice. The Professor turned upon him almost savagely.

"Joke, jest, mock, Mr Teffany—anything to drive

away from your mind the conviction that you are called upon to espouse the cause of your country, your subjects! This is the difference between your case and your grandfather's—that the crisis which had not arisen in his day now confronts you. We Emathian Greeks are faced by an organised conspiracy to despoil us, slay us, make renegades of us—in fact, to wipe us out, as you would say, from our own country.”

“But how is it? who is doing it?” cried Zoe.

“The schismatics, with Scythia working behind them,” was the reply. “By immemorial right and tradition Emathia is a Greek country, but agitators are being sent among the people—ours predominantly by race, converted, shepherded, educated by us—to persuade them by bribes and threats to declare themselves Thracians, Dardanians, even Dacians—anything that may give colour to the fiction of Slav descent, and consequently alienate them from us.”

“But which are they really? Or are they so mixed that they may be anything?”

“The mixture of races and languages is extraordinary,” conceded the Professor unwillingly. “But in the incredible confusion that exists, we Greeks alone present a clear issue. Until recently, every Christian in the Roumi dominions was styled a Greek without question, and if our people are not tampered with, we can continue to supply them with education and religious ministrations, and confine their agitation for release from Roum within legal limits. But this unites against us all the aspiring nationalities—as they call themselves—that covet Emathian territory, and the result is that our churches are desecrated, and whole families massacred for the sole crime of fidelity to Orthodoxy. I dare not recount in the presence of your sister the fate that has befallen young Greek

schoolmistresses, living unprotected in the villages of the parents of their pupils."

"Why send unprotected girls to run such risks?"

"The girls accepted them of their own free will," returned the Professor smartly. "They placed the Greek cause—the cause of their race—above life itself."

"What do you want me to do?" demanded Maurice.

"Your countrymen in Emathia need a rallying-point, a hope. Inevitably many of them succumb, less to the temptations held out than to the reign of terror that surrounds them, and declare themselves Thracians or Dardanians. A Thracian or Dardanian priest takes charge of them, a school follows, and the next generation will actually be Thracians or Dardanians by education. But let it be whispered among them secretly that a deliverer is at hand, that the descendant of their ancient rulers is waiting to place himself at their head, and they will hold out. At the same time, the minds of the wealthy Greeks in the cities, in Czarigrad itself, will also be prepared, and when the outrages of the revolutionary committees have stirred Europe from its lethargy, we shall appeal against them. The impossibility of discovering a suitable ruler for Emathia, who would also be acceptable to its inhabitants, has been the great difficulty of the past, but when a man appears who has actually the right to rule, and yet is willing to stand as the nominee of the Powers, as Vali, Commissioner, Prince—what you will—they must accept the solution with relief, from pure weariness of the subject. It has been the case already in Minoa. Once you were established, the Roumis could not long hold Czarigrad. For four centuries they have occupied European soil, though only as birds of passage. They will leave no monuments, their very houses are temporary lodging-places. They have always kept one eye on

Asia, and when the moment comes they will return thither—perhaps without striking a blow. You will have delivered Europe from its most shameful stain.”

“Oh, Maurice, you will do it?” entreated Zoe.

“You don’t understand,” said Maurice harshly. “The Professor is talking of success, but what about failure? And this is not the kind of thing that can be lightly begun, and laid down if it seems to be going to fail. If we once take it up, we can never drop it.”

Zoe would have remonstrated, but the Professor stopped her.

“Your brother is right, Miss Teffany,” he said, “and I rejoice at the spirit in which he approaches the matter. That he should perceive so clearly that the contest can end only with his life, and yet contemplate entering upon it, gives me the most vivid hope for the future. But as I have been instrumental in placing this choice before him, may I be permitted to make a suggestion? Do not decide at once, sir. Pay a visit to Emathia, and do me the honour of being my guest at my villa near Therma. My house in the city itself is untenanted during the summer, but in the hills you and your sister will find the climate pleasant and salubrious. My wife, a most estimable woman, with the heart of a cook and the form of the Niederwald Germania, will rejoice to display for your benefit the resources of her skill.”

“But if you are constantly exposed to these revolutionary raids, a country house can scarcely be safe for ladies,” said Maurice, frowning.

“There is a Roumi garrison not far off, and I am on good terms with the officers. You must understand that, before quitting my professorial chair at Benna, I had become heir to the very considerable possessions of a relative. All that I own is consecrated to the

Greek cause, and a portion of it smoothes my way with the Roumi authorities, and thus enables me to maintain communication with the Greeks scattered throughout Emathia. The Committees accuse us, of course, of being traitors to the Christian faith, but can they wonder that we should prefer the Roumis to such Christians as they are? But come and visit me at Kallimeri, and you shall see the state of things for yourself. You shall meet the leaders of the Greek party, and you shall have every opportunity I can contrive to become acquainted with the methods of the Slav propagandists. You are committed to nothing unless you choose."

"I will think about it, and give you an answer to-morrow."

"Oh, Maurice, to-night, to-night!" entreated Zoe. "Think of the copy I could get! I shan't sleep a wink."

"To-morrow," replied Maurice inexorably, and Zoe went to bed murmuring "*Zoe Theophanes, de stirpe imperatorum*," with loving iteration.

"You mustn't think that Maurice is slack or cold-hearted," she said to the Professor, meeting him in the garden the next morning. "He won't be hurried into anything, and he never lets any one make up his mind for him, but when once he sees that a thing is right, he holds on to it like grim death."

"Precisely my own reading of your brother's character," agreed the Professor. "Shall I confess that I was at first a little disappointed at not finding in Mr Teffany that enthusiasm for our persecuted compatriots which is so manifest in his sister? But I perceived quickly the tenacity of his purpose—a quality which it is even more important to enlist on our side."

"Yes," said Zoe warmly, "if he once decides to join you, you will never be disappointed in him. He is so thoroughly dependable. Of course, I never let him know what I think of him," she added inconsequently—"it wouldn't be good for him—but he is splendid. Very few men would have gone to college, as he did, at a good deal over the usual age, after practically managing the estate for my grandfather for years. But he felt it was the right thing to do, and as soon as he was free he did it."

"But surely you did the same?"

"Yes, I went up to Girtham at the same time. But a girl is always thankful to get an education, you know, just as a boy is always thankful to escape it. So you won't hurry Maurice, will you, or try to influence his judgment?"

"My lips are sealed, unless Mr Teffany himself addresses me on the subject. But I am infinitely indebted to Miss Teffany for her warning."

The Professor's thanks gave Zoe an uncomfortable feeling of disloyalty to Maurice, and, in flat contradiction of the advice she had just given, she attacked her brother on the momentous subject when she saw him next.

"Oh, Maurice, you will do it, won't you? It is so splendid to think of your driving the Roumis from Czarigrad, and establishing peace in Emathia."

"The question at present before the House is that of our summer trip," was the discouraging reply.

"But that shows you are inclined to take up the matter, doesn't it? If it doesn't, why hesitate about going to Therma?"

"Because I can't bring myself to trust the Professor absolutely. I should object to be entirely in his hands."

"I know; I saw you were not quite satisfied. But why?"

"Did you like the way he spoke of his wife? I should have thought that would have rubbed you the wrong way at once."

"Why, Maurice, it was a whole life's tragedy compressed into two lines! I thought how artistically he did it, revealing the state of affairs without unduly obtruding his sorrows upon us. I do adore a light touch."

"Oh, don't talk shop! Well, then, didn't it strike you how determined he was that we should see everything in Emathia from one side—his side, of course? It isn't reasonable that the Greek Emathians should possess all the virtues and the other fellows all the vices. I want to know what the Thracians and Dardanians have to say for themselves."

"Well, perhaps you will be able to manage that."

"Not if I am exhibited from the very beginning as the private property of Professor Panagiotis. The man may be perfectly straight, but it's unlikely, to say the least, that he doesn't expect to reap a full equivalent for any services he may render."

"Oh, you think he would want to be Premier or something?"

"Something a good deal more, I should say. Keeper of my conscience, power behind the throne, and that sort of thing. And you see, he has the game in his hands. I have nothing but my name, he has the sinews of war, the local knowledge, the political organisation, and he thinks that corners me. 'Such cunning they who dwell on high Have given unto the Greek.' No, I haven't decided, Zoe. I'm thinking it out, and if I can see a way of going to Therma without delivering myself over body and soul to Panagiotis, you shall

have your trip. I know that 'copy' is more important than anything in heaven or earth."

Somewhat abashed, Zoe retired, and if she said little, thought the more until, after dinner, Maurice again suggested a move into the library. She waited in breathless suspense.

"My sister and I have been talking over your kind invitation, sir," he said, rather formally, "and if you can assure us on one or two points, we shall accept it with pleasure. It is understood that we come purely as your private guests, and that we are at liberty to cultivate the society of the opposite party, as well as of your own friends, as far as opportunity offers?"

"You shall enjoy every opportunity that I can give you," returned the Professor heartily. "I will not pretend that Committee leaders are often to be found near Kallimeri, for the Roumi garrison close at hand is too strong, but their dupes, the peasants, you will be able to question. And as for your first condition, I shall surprise you by asking for a greater degree of privacy than you expect. I am going to request that you will conceal your too-significant surname under an alias."

"I don't see the necessity," said Maurice stiffly.

"Without this precaution, I cannot guarantee your safety. Consider, my dear sir; the difference between Theophanis and Teffany is not so great but that their identity may occur to a watchful enemy—or to many at once. Then you and your sister are at once set up as a target for the efforts of the many whose interest it is to have you removed."

"Then there are other claimants?" asked Maurice, conscious that Zoe had turned a little pale.

"Who is not a claimant? The King of Thracia

would like to add Emathia to his dominions, but we need not fear him since he has got rid of his English Prime Minister. That firebrand, the Princess Dowager of Dardania, who filched from us the province of Rhodope a few years ago, intended to merge her son's petty principality in a State comprising the whole of Emathia. She has now quarrelled with him, but she continues her intrigues on behalf of her younger son, an officer in the Scythian army. I need not remind you of the desires of Scythia, Pannonia, and Morea, and you have always to consider the revolutionary committees, many of whose members are fanatical republicans. No, Mr Teffany, I cannot accept the responsibility of your visit unless you will consent to pass by a less distinctive name."

"Very well," said Maurice reluctantly, this sudden turning of the tables upon him serving, perhaps, to stimulate his unfixed resolution.

"Then we will be Smiths, of course," said Zoe joyfully. "We have a hereditary right to the name, and it is splendid for an alias, because no one will think it is one."

"Moreover," proceeded the Professor, "you must remember that you are not altogether unprovided with relations, outside the limits of that pedigree there. For instance, your ancestor Alexius Theophanis, the first of the name to settle in England, came to Cornwall from Italy, where many of the Greek families preserved their nationality and faith for more than a century. He left there a sister, Eudoxia, who married Romanos Christodorides, and became the ancestress of the powerful family of Christodoridi, Despots of the island of Strio. Her descendants would not succeed until after those of her brother, of course."

"And they would naturally not be sorry to see the

brother's descendants wiped out, you mean ? " suggested Maurice.

" Hardly that. Prince Christodoridi would probably prefer to base his claim on the invalidity of the marriage of Alexius Theophanis with a foreigner and a member of another church, contrary to the law of the Imperial house."

" If that's true, he holds a pretty strong card," said Maurice.

" The law was disregarded several times," said Zoe quickly. " Gibbon says so."

The Professor regarded her approvingly. " Quite so. But as we do not wish to incite the Christodoridis to take action, we will not bring your existence to their ears before it is necessary. In any case, Prince Christodoridi's claims are unimportant. The Emperor John, your heroic ancestor, left another son and two daughters besides your progenitor Basil. Anna, the eldest daughter, married Boris, Grand Prince of Scythia, and carried the blood of the Cæsars into the Scythian Imperial house. Helena, the younger, married into the Dacian family of Gratianco, from which is descended the mother of Prince Timoleon Malasorte, the Neustrian Imperial claimant. But these claims through females are merely curious. The only person whose right at all approaches yours is the descendant of Leo, second son of John Theophanis. About forty years ago the officiousness of Scythian agents ferreted out in Dacia an obscure landed proprietor directly descended from Leo. He was invited to Pavelsburg, decorated, given the title of Royal Highness, with estates and a pension to support it, and complimented with the hope of being restored to his ancestor's throne. Of course there was no thought of fulfilling the promises made him; the only intention was to keep him under surveillance.

He wore out his life in fruitless attempts to get his cause adopted, and when I managed to approach him, as I have now approached you, he had not the energy to take the steps to which my advice and the detestation he had conceived for Scythia would have urged him. He left only a daughter, and it was this disappointment which sent me to England to make one more attempt to trace the descendants of Basil. A male heir in the male line is what we want. The work before us is not for women."

"This man was a Theophanis, then?" asked Maurice.

"Prince Nicolai Andréivitch Féofan—so they call it in Scythia. It seems that his family had preserved the memory of their Imperial descent through the centuries, though fear of the Roumis kept them from disclosing it. When he was summoned to Pavelsburg, he thought it only an ante-room to Czarigrad, and when he found himself deceived, he wished to retire to Dacia again, but this was not permitted. At his death, he was little better than a State prisoner, and he left his daughter in the same position. No doubt a marriage will be arranged for her with one of the less important Grand Dukes, that her claim also may be safely vested in the Imperial family."

"Poor thing!" said Zoe. Now that Maurice's claim was incontestably established to be the strongest, she felt a curious pity for the girl who must believe herself to be what Maurice actually was, the rightful inheritor of the glories of the Empire of the East.

CHAPTER III.

THE ORIENT EXPRESS.

NOT more than three weeks later, Maurice and Zoe stood on the platform of the Gare de l'Est, about to enter upon the second stage of their journey eastwards. Professor Panagiotis had urged that they should start as soon as possible, before the increasing heat should make railway travelling disagreeable, but he scouted Zoe's suggestion that they should go when he did. Their visiting him at Kallimeri would attract quite sufficient attention, he said, and it was most important that no idea of their being connected in any way with his political schemes should get abroad. He had made the arrangements for their journey, procuring them passports as Maurice and Zoe Smith, and, at his suggestion, Maurice had requested his bankers to honour cheques bearing their signatures in these names. It was understood among their friends that Zoe had persuaded Maurice to take her to Eastern Europe that she might lay the scene of a novel there, and she gave colour to the opinion by the number of note-books of different sorts and sizes which made her luggage heavy, if not bulky. These were destined to cause endless trouble at the several frontiers, for the official mind, unable to understand why so many blank volumes should be needed, conceived the idea that they

contained Anarchist literature written in invisible ink, and insisted on subjecting them to severe tests. But this was still in the future, and Zoe was rejoicing in the imminent prospect of romance, to be not only written but lived. During the few hours they spent in London, she had dragged Maurice to Westminster Abbey, that they might visit the obscure grave of "Mr Nicholas Thephany." Maurice refused sternly to allow her to take a wreath for it, but she succeeded, behind his back, in dropping upon the stone the handful of carnations which had been tucked into her belt. Unfortunately, they were carefully gathered up and returned to her by a polite verger, which spoilt the significance of the act, and exposed her to Maurice's sarcasms. But nothing could detract from the joy of having an ancestor buried in the Abbey, or of tracing one's lineage back to the Cæsars.

At the Paris station Zoe's eyes met Maurice's, in a kind of half-ashamed smile, across the pile of luggage conspicuously labelled "Smith," while he was directing the porter, but before she had time to make any remark a uniformed attendant approached.

"The other ladies of Monsieur's party are here," he said, and they followed him mechanically, too much astonished to protest. He led the way to a compartment intended for four, in which two ladies were already seated, one elderly, with an almost aggressive air of high breeding, the other a girl rather younger than Zoe, in a smart travelling-gown, which had not come from the hands of any English tailor. Zoe, surveying it from the satisfactory standpoint of her own workmanlike coat and skirt, remarked mentally that it simply shrieked "Vindobona!" The ladies' luggage, which occupied the other two seats, was labelled "Smith." With a wave of his hand the

attendant motioned Maurice and Zoe to enter, and departed. Zoe imagined that he received an approving glance from the younger lady, who sprang up and began to move her possessions.

"Oh, we are to be fellow-passengers, then?" she cried pleasantly, speaking with a slight foreign accent.

"That is excessively agreeable. Pray come in."

"There must be some mistake——" began Maurice.

"A mistake? But let us convert it into an advantage! We shall be delighted to enjoy your society."

"Edith! Heart's dearest!" cried the other lady, speaking English with an obvious effort, "you outrage the proprieties, you affront Monsieur and Mademoiselle. Recall the position, I beg of you."

"It does not seem to me that Monsieur and Mademoiselle are in the least affronted," said the girl readily, but with a heightened colour. "Is it not natural for us to travel together—as compatriots, and doubtless distant relations?" with a little bow which had a suspicion of mockery in its politeness.

"You are very kind——" said Zoe stiffly, but the elderly lady interrupted her.

"Did I not tell you so, Emily?" Zoe intercepted an angry glance of warning from the girl. "The young lady is scandalised—shocked—at your behaviour. Pray do not persist."

"We are very much obliged," said Zoe firmly, "but we have chosen our seats elsewhere, and our things are waiting for us."

"But you could have them brought here," suggested the irrepressible Miss Smith.

"Thank you, but we are going to have dinner as soon as the train starts."

"Ah, we have dined already, but after this evening we might share a table. Why are you so little kind?"

the girl's voice followed Zoe pleadingly as she closed the discussion by turning away. She had an odd feeling of self-reproach, though she had only acted in the most prudent and proper way, and Maurice offered her no comfort. He could not bring himself to say that the unconventional 'invitation ought to have been accepted, but it was evident he thought she might have managed to decline it without hurting Miss Smith's feelings. It was not until they were half-way through dinner that the sense of constraint produced by the incident wore off, and Zoe felt inclined to talk freely.

"I feel so delightfully thrilled!" she said, leaning back luxuriously. "My heart always leaps up when I see the words 'Orient Express'—just as the sight of a cabin-trunk with a P. & O. label makes me think of the Black Hole and the Mutiny and all sorts of interesting things—and now to be actually on board! Have you found out yet which is the compartment always reserved for an emissary of the British Government?"

"Patience, patience!" entreated Maurice. "Give a man a little time."

"Well, I have spotted the man—the emissary I mean," said Zoe triumphantly. "He has J. G. W. on his bag, and he is a soldier and has been in India, and he has the most startlingly blue eyes I ever saw."

"Now, why startling?" asked Maurice tolerantly.

"Why, with that brown face and fairly dark hair you expect dark eyes, and it gives you quite a shock when he looks up and you see how blue they are."

"I expect the startling man with the blue eyes got a shock when he looked up and found you staring at him. I know the fellow you mean, but when

you managed to find out the details of his personal history beats me."

"Purely inference, my dear boy. Any one could see he was a soldier, and he has the Indian look about the eyebrows."

"My good girl, Sherlock Holmes was nothing to you."

"Thanks, so much! I believe he is a King's messenger."

"Inference again, I suppose?"

"Well, he seems to have something on his mind. I can't quite decide whether he's in charge of something very precious, or whether he has lived so much among enemies that he's got into the habit of being always on the alert for an attack."

"It's just as well you are a little modest, for I'm pretty certain that a King's messenger wears a badge of some sort, and lugs a despatch-box about with him."

"Oh, Maurice, you are dense! Of course he is on very special service, and has been warned not to exhibit anything that would reveal his identity."

"And he is so clever in concealing it that he lets himself be spotted by the first girl he runs across who's been reading detective stories! Tell you what, I'll make up to him and break his self-betrayal to him gently. He really ought to know."

"Oh no, don't ask him outright what he is! It's so much more interesting to think of him as a King's messenger than as somebody's nephew on his way to spend part of his leave at Czarigrad. He doesn't look important enough for a military attaché."

"Look here, Zoe, you really must curb your unbridled imagination. You'll have the whole train peopled with mysterious personalities in no time.

By the bye," with elaborate carelessness, "what do you make of our namesakes?"

"Mrs Smith may possibly have married an Englishman," meditatively, "but her name is the only English thing about her. As for the girl, her name is no more Smith than——"

"Ours is!" cried Maurice. "The plot thickens. Go on."

"I believe she is a Scythian spy," said Zoe calmly.

"Oh, draw it mild! That girl? I say, this fitting people with imaginary characters is all very well, but you have no right—— Do spies generally go about chaperoned by elderly aunts?"

"If it is her aunt. Why, Maurice, don't you see? She has designs upon the document which the King's messenger is in charge of, of course, and even the very youngest and greenest of King's messengers would be suspicious of a fascinating unchaperoned young lady by this time."

"Well, I should have said if she had designs on any one, it was on you."

"Oh, that's only a blind. No; I see it! She isn't sure about the King's messenger. He has effaced himself so carefully that she is wavering between you and him. My presence may be intended to divert suspicion from you, as the aunt's is from her, and she will try to attack you by getting round me. Then in the night I shall catch her, with a dark lantern, ransacking my dressing-bag, because she will think I have the document concealed in it. There, Maurice!"

"If you must make up these idiotic things, you might as well try to put just a touch of probability into them."

"Probability! Why, it's all but certainty. Of course, she's not a professional spy. She is some one

of very high rank who has got herself into the power of the Scythian Government, either by gambling or by being mixed up in political movements. That explains why, with all her anxiety for our acquaintance, she was determined to keep me in my place. Don't you know how gratified a City lady feels when she has been presented to Royalty at a bazaar? She tells all her friends how affable the dear Princess was, but that no one would dream of taking a liberty with her. I don't in the least want to take liberties with Miss Edith Emily Smith, but she is afraid I might, and so she adopts this superior tone. Oh, Maurice, if she only knew! Isn't it perfectly lovely to think of?"

"The waiter has been watching despairingly for your plate for some time," said Maurice. "When you have quite finished, I shall be glad to go and get a smoke."

"And you are to be sure and make friends with the King's messenger, mind," said Zoe, hastily finishing her dessert; but Maurice replied darkly, as he turned towards the smoking-car, that he would not promise.

Returning to her own compartment, not without a secret intention of glancing in at Mrs and Miss Smith as she passed, Zoe had a narrow escape of falling headlong over a travelling-bag which the younger lady, with reckless disregard for the safety of the public, was thrusting out into the corridor. The offender was profuse in her apologies.

"Oh, how careless I am!" she cried. "You might have hurt yourself seriously. I should never have forgiven myself if my negligence had injured you, of all people."

"Your malignity, rather, for it's quite clear you did it on purpose," was Zoe's mental comment. "Why

am I so much more precious than all the other people on board?" she asked.

"Oh, because——" with arch hesitation—"because of that mistake about our names, you know, and because you and I are the only young girls in the train. Certainly we ought to help one another."

"I should say you needed about as little help as any person I know. And you needn't try to flirt with *me!*" thought the unbelieving Zoe. "How could I help you?" she inquired aloud.

"Oh, come and talk to me a little. My aunt is always sleeping. I feel idle. All the people in the train have some acquaintance, some occupation, except ourselves"—she indicated the slumbering Mrs Smith and herself. "Even you are doubtless travelling for the sake of the business of your respectable brother? Oh!" as she caught the shadow of a smile on Zoe's face, "is that bad English? Now you see what help you can give me in teaching me to speak my own language."

"Oh, we have no business to see to; we are only out on a spree—if you know that word?" said Zoe wickedly. "My brother has just done with college, and we felt he deserved a holiday. If we have any business, it's mine—looking for local colour. You know what that is—the stuff which you have to put into a book if you're writing it, but which you always skip in reading it? Everybody that knows about my writing is always saying, 'Oh, you must travel. It will enlarge your mind so much, and think of the local colour you will gain!' I have note-books crammed full of local colour, only waiting for the stories which are to bring it in, and the worst of it is that when I do write anything, I am always so frightfully interested in the people that the local colour gets crowded out."

Miss Smith looked somewhat bewildered by this fragment of literary autobiography. "Then you are an author—a Bohemian?" she said, with a distinct touch of disapproval.

"An author? Well, in a sort of way—a very humble way at present. But a Bohemian—oh, no! I only wish I was! Who ever heard such a stolid, steady-going name as Smith associated with Bohemianism?—I knew it! I knew her name wasn't Smith!" she told herself delightedly, noticing that the other girl did not wince.

"And I have not even the excuse of looking for local colour!" remarked the self-styled Miss Smith. "I wanted to travel—to be really English—and I made my aunt come. She is a foreigner—you may have noticed?—and she has brought me up abroad with her."

"I fancy you brought yourself up, wherever you were. I don't think poor Mrs Smith had much voice in the matter," thought Zoe. "Well, you ought to be satisfied now," she said aloud.

"I know I ought, but do you know"—the girl bent towards her confidentially—"I am a little—almost frightened. We have never travelled unattended before, and my aunt is so nervous."

"But why in the world didn't you bring a maid or a courier, or both?" cried Zoe, astonished.

"That is what we ought to have done, of course, and at Therma I shall insist on our finding suitable attendants. But I was going to propose that we should join forces for the journey. If you and your brother will favour us with your society—especially at meals—we should have no fear of making disagreeable acquaintances." She spoke with the utmost coolness, and without any of the blushing diffidence that

might have been expected—almost as if the suggestion, which should surely in any case have come from her aunt, was an honour not to be declined.

"My good girl, what is your game?" thought the scandalised Zoe. "Is it Maurice?" with a sister's instinctive vigilance. "If it is, you are the very coolest hand I ever saw. I don't think you need be in the least frightened," she said frigidly. "English ladies are not likely to be molested when there are so many Englishmen in the train."

"What did I tell you, Eirene?" cried Mrs Smith, waking at an inopportune moment. "You have too little regard for the conventions. This young lady finds your freedom altogether shocking."

"Edith—Emily—Irene! How many more names has she got?" was Zoe's mental comment as she watched, rather mercilessly, the flush which rose into Miss Smith's face.

"I have requested you already to leave this matter to me," said the young lady coldly, and the aunt collapsed. "Yes, my name is Eirene," turning to Zoe with a radiant smile. "Spelt with an E, you know," as Zoe's eyes wandered to the "E. E. Smith" upon a jewel-case. "We were so anxious to be English that my aunt has been trying to call me by a real English name, but it is no use. I hope you will call me Eirene in future. And you will relieve my curiosity by telling me your name? Z is such a strange initial, and I saw it upon your bag."

"My name is Zoe," admitted the owner of the name reluctantly as she rose to leave the compartment.

"A Greek name, surely, like my own? Perhaps we are really distant cousins after all! Then it is settled—that you and your brother join us at meals?"

"I beg your pardon, we have already made our

arrangements, and secured a table that only holds two," said the exasperated Zoe, flinging this Parthian shaft as she departed with all the dignity that the motion of the train would allow.

"What is she after?" she asked herself again as she reached her own compartment, whither Maurice had not yet returned. "Can she really be a spy? If so, I suppose the best thing will be to appear quite innocent and unsuspecting. She can't make us tell anything we don't want to. I must give Maurice a hint not to let her worm things out of him. The funny part is that I believe she really is frightened. Her eyes were upon every one who passed. Pardon me, that seat is engaged," as some one pressed past her. "Oh, this is really too much!" for the intruder was Miss Smith, who sat down in Maurice's place, gripping the arms of the seat as though she feared Zoe would eject her by force.

"I wished to tell you that they will place us at the same table at breakfast," she said hurriedly. "The man came to ask me just as a matter of course, and I—I said, '*Mais sans doute.*' I meant to do it, and yet—it slipped out at the moment. I am come to entreat you not to countermand the order. You can't understand what a difference it will make to me to be allowed to travel as a member of a party—of a family."

The wildest suspicions were seething in Zoe's brain. What was this girl—a murderess, a Nihilist, or a thief? What designs might she not have on Maurice, on his prospects? Anxiety for him made her manner glacial. "I am sorry we cannot add to our party," she said. "We are going to stay with friends."

"But it is only for the journey!" cried the girl eagerly. "Once at Therma, you go your way, I mine."

We do not meet again, but you will hear—yes, you will certainly hear about me, and I assure you that you won't find me ungrateful."

"I don't care about your gratitude," said Zoe bluntly. "What I want to be sure of is that you are not doing anything wrong."

"Wrong? What wrong should I do? Do you think I am an Anarchist, laden with bombs to fling at the Grand Seigneur? I find your suspicions singularly insulting."

"I am sorry for it. Has it occurred to you that I might think the same of your persistent efforts to force your company upon us?" "That will fetch her, if anything will!" said Zoe triumphantly to herself.

The girl's eyes flamed. "You are insolent!" she flashed out. "How dare you—— But no, I have drawn it upon myself. Mademoiselle, will you accept my assurance that I have no evil-doing in view? I am taking my journey upon a purely family matter, confided to me by a dying parent. I carry with me my jewels, which are of considerable value—ineestimable value to me. Upon their safety may hang the success of my expedition. Once more I ask you to grant me the protection of your company and that of Monsieur your brother, and pray do not think that it is easy for me to entreat. I am not accustomed to it."

"I think we ought to have some idea of your object before being asked to mix ourselves up with it," said Zoe, but less firmly.

"If it affected myself alone, I would reveal it to you without a moment's hesitation, but it concerns others. No, if my assurance is not enough for you, you must continue to regard me as an adventuress, a spy—what you will—and I must endure it." She folded her hands in her lap with sorrowful dignity,

but her lips were quivering, and a tear rolled slowly down her face.

"Oh, don't cry!" said Zoe hastily, with the modern woman's horror of tears. "Of course you can have your meals with us, and we'll travel together if you really want it. Only I can't say that you belong to us if I'm asked."

"You will not be asked. A family party will pass unquestioned. It is two ladies alone who would attract attention. Oh, I am so glad!" she cried, abandoning disguise, and drying her eyes vigorously. "Evdotia Vladimirovna—my aunt, I mean—is so frightened, and I have been obliged to encourage her, and I was so frightened myself. Every one might be a spy or a secret agent. Then I saw the luggage with the name 'Smith,' and I saw you and your brother, and your faces looked trustworthy, and I thought we should be safe with you. I shall never forget this service, you may be sure," with a return to stateliness, as she rose and departed.

"I feel a regular fool!" said Zoe viciously to herself. "But, after all, she did play fair. If she had attacked Maurice instead of me, she wouldn't have had a quarter of the trouble."

"I have scraped acquaintance with your startling-eyed friend," said Maurice, coming in. "He is not a King's messenger, you will be interested to hear, but an Indian officer going back after his leave. He's to stay a week or two with a friend who's in the Emathian Gendarmerie, and his name's Wylie."

"Well, I told you nearly as much about him simply from inference. Did you hear anything about Miss Smith?"

"Oh, one fat old chap, who seems to come this way about once a week and knows all the officials, was very

busy hinting that he had it from the sleeping-car attendant that she was somebody very big travelling *incog*."

"A Princess running away from school, I should think!" murmured Zoe. "Well, to-morrow morning either she will sink in the general estimation or we shall go up, for we are to breakfast together."

"You don't mean to say that you have taken her up after all?" cried Maurice. "Well, don't say it was my doing." But his warning tone was not wholly devoid of satisfaction.

CHAPTER IV.

A FULL STOP.

IN after days it seemed to Zoe that the stages of the journey were marked by the progress of her intimacy with Eirene Smith. There was that terrible midnight hour when, sleepy and bewildered, she was called upon by a ferocious German customs officer to explain the nature and purpose of the note-books in her dressing-bag, and could reply in nothing but scraps of French, Latin, and Greek, which ought to have increased the official's respect for her, but only deepened his suspicions. Not a word of German would come to her mind, and the occupant of the other berth, an elderly French lady in an astonishing nightcap, was not only of no practical use, but was evidently watching between her curtains with awful joy to see Zoe haled from the train and arraigned before the authorities. Never was anything more welcome than the appearance of Eirene from the next cabin in an exquisite embroidered dressing-gown. She had heard the altercation, and, coming upon the scene, assumed the direction of affairs. Her German did not forsake her, and the customs officer went away placated, but grimly assuring Zoe that she might thank *Ihre Fräulein Schwester* that she and her possessions were not detained. The relief was great, and Zoe thanked Eirene heartily in rather

tremulous tones. The French lady, disappointed of her expected sensation, transferred herself easily to the side of the victor, and inveighed against the brutality of the official while eulogising the courage and coolness of Eirene.

"And the prudence also of mademoiselle!" she cried. "She has there even her jewel-case, not forgetting to snatch it up at a moment of the greatest tension!"

"I never let it leave me," said Eirene simply. "See, madame, they are very precious to me, these jewels. They are of the possessions of my late dear mother."

She opened the box, and took out one or two of the trinkets it contained, handsome and old-fashioned; not at all sufficient, in Zoe's opinion, to account for the anxiety she had expressed in speaking of them to her.

"Ah, very pretty," said madame, regarding them with greedy eyes. "Too old in style for a young girl, but you will doubtless have them reset. But how comes it that all the jewels are yours, mademoiselle, while your elder sister wears not so much as a pin?"

"We are not own sisters, madame," returned Eirene, with a fascinating mixture of truth and audacity. "But that makes no difference to our love, does it, my Zoe?"

Eirene had the jewel-case with her again when she and Zoe met in the dressing-room the next morning. They had been charged to make haste, as the elder ladies desired the room to themselves for the process of hair-dressing, which could not properly be performed before youthful eyes, but Eirene fastened the doors and opened her box a second time.

"Now I will show you!" she said gleefully. "You shall see that I trust you, though you don't trust me,

and that I am willing to confide to you anything that affects myself alone. Look, then!" and Zoe gazed, astonished, as the satin lining of the lid fell forward on the pressure of a spring, revealing a wonderful necklace of huge pearls fitting into a shallow receptacle evidently constructed for it. In like manner the sides and trays of the box, judiciously manipulated, revealed a number of emerald and diamond sprays—the stones extraordinarily fine—which might either be used separately, or united to form a necklace or tiara, and a bodice ornament of great rubies in the shape of a globe flanked by spreading wings, with a deep pendant. Lastly, Eirene showed that the box had also a false bottom.

"This is my greatest treasure," she said, exhibiting a number of golden plaques which could be fastened one to another to form a girdle. Each plaque was curiously embossed with the figure of a saint, apparently raised in enamel upon the gold background, while the halo and portions of the dress were encrusted with precious stones. "I am obliged to take it to pieces for travelling, but I do it with terror, for it is old—yes, of an astonishing antiquity, and there is nothing like it in the whole world."

"It must be Byzantine work, surely?" asked Zoe, examining it with intense interest.

Eirene looked at her with something like suspicion. "Yes," she said coldly, and, taking the massive clasp from Zoe's hands, she returned it to its place and snapped down the false bottom over it. Her displeasure was so uncalled for that Zoe experienced a return of the unamiable feelings of the evening before, but before the box had been restored to its usual appearance the momentary cloud had passed away, and Eirene was replying with gay defiance to Mrs

Smith's remonstrances through the closed door on her delay.

The next stage in Zoe's appreciation of her new friend's personality came at breakfast-time, when Eirene remarked with smiling effrontery to Maurice, whom Zoe had just introduced to her with a formality intended to show that the acquaintance of the day before was insufficient—

"It is so kind of Zoe to have arranged everything, so that we need not enter upon any tiresome explanations. Please be assured of my best thanks for adopting me as a sister during the journey. Until we part at Therma I am Eirene, if you please. You, if I am not mistaken, are Maurice?"

As much astonished as his rightful sister, and conscious of Mrs Smith's face of wrathful agony in the background, Maurice had sufficient presence of mind to accept the situation, and mutter something about pleasure and honour. The only unembarrassed member of the party was Eirene herself, who motioned Zoe to the seat beside her at the table, and Maurice to that opposite, informing her outraged aunt that she would find her step-nephew *bien gentil* and truly conversable. Taking the lead herself as a matter of course, she insisted on making the talk general, and before long Maurice and Zoe found their embarrassment fading away. Mrs Smith remained implacable, and answered only when she was directly addressed; but the other three were able to laugh and talk quite naturally. From his solitary table on the other side of the gangway, the man whom Zoe had styled the King's messenger watched them with wistful amusement.

"It's pretty clear the younger girl is only Smith's step-sister," he said to himself, "and the aunt is her

private property. I suppose the aunt married the father's brother, as her name is Smith too. No, that would make her their aunt as well. It's a sort of puzzle in relationships; but with such a common name it may well be a mere coincidence. I should say the aunt and the younger girl's mother were foreign and noble, and a good deal inclined to look down on the plain English part of the family. Smith will soon get tired of being tyrannised over by that little minx, and I could see Miss Smith didn't half like it when they came in. It's the sort of thing that palls pretty quickly. I suppose they wanted to make the step-sister's acquaintance, but why bring the aunt, who has evidently made her the sun and centre of things? What a pity we can't eliminate Mrs Smith! If she was out of the way—a convenient headache, now—I think Smith might take pity upon my loneliness and ask me to their table. They sound awfully jolly all together, and with three of us against her, it would be hard if we couldn't take Miss Eirene down a peg. Her brother and sister are much too meek."

Mrs Smith was not accommodating enough to have a headache—indeed, her expression implied that heartily as she detested her present position, wild horses should not drag her from it—but Captain Wylie was not forbidden the introduction he desired. "My sister, Miss Smith—Miss Eirene Smith," said Maurice, bringing him up to the girls after breakfast, and receiving a smile from Eirene for his adroitness, though the presentation did not seem altogether to please her, apparently because her consent had not been secured beforehand. She gave Wylie the cold shoulder, as though she had read his sentiments towards her and reciprocated them, but Zoe, who had incited Maurice to introduce him, was quite satisfied. Wylie was the

kind of man she liked. If he would talk, he could tell her things about India which might be useful in future; if not, she could look at him and make up far more wonderful things about him herself. He was not much of a talker, as it turned out, but sufficiently articulate to answer informingly when he was questioned; and Zoe was a past mistress in the art of what she called drawing people out, and Maurice, picking their brains.

As the day wore on it became evident to Zoe that Eirene was growing increasingly nervous. She could not rest for a moment, but roamed from one compartment to another, and up and down the corridor, shaking with agitation when she came face to face with any of the other passengers or an official. At last Maurice brought out his travelling chess-board and induced her to sit down to a game, promising that she should walk off her restlessness at Vindobona, so far as a stop of twenty minutes and the limits of the station would allow. But when they were approaching the Imperial city, and Maurice had gone to get his hat, she clutched Zoe's arm convulsively.

"Oh, I dare not leave the train! It is here I shall be recognised if anywhere. Begin a game, quick; then I can keep my head bent over the board. May I hold your hand?"

Cold and trembling, her hand gripped Zoe's under the flap of the table, and she was arranging the pieces when Maurice was heard returning. The clutch tightened.

"Don't let them go far from the carriage. Oh, make them return to us continually! Couldn't they stay here with us? No, it would excite suspicion. But tell them not to go far."

Maurice and Wylie were much puzzled by the girls'

obstinate absorption in what appeared a singularly erratic game, and their firm refusal to walk about on the platform, but they made themselves useful by first going to the bookstall to see what Tauchnitz volumes were in stock, then making an expedition to buy one for Eirene, a second to get one for Zoe, and a third to change Eirene's, which she discovered she had read before. Zoe was almost as much excited as Eirene by the time this point was reached. It was all very well to want to keep Maurice near at hand, but if Eirene was arrested, as she seemed to fear might be the case, what did she expect him to do? She could scarcely imagine that he and Wylie would attempt to rescue her from the Pannonian police. Of course they would appeal to the British Ambassador; but Zoe did not now believe that Eirene was even a British subject, and Maurice would probably have to declare his real name, with what danger to the purpose of his journey who could tell?

"Oh, Zoe, how carelessly you play! Check!" cried Eirene. "You are worse than you were months ago." This for the benefit of a guard who had approached near enough to hear what they said. "Ah, it is nearly over!" with a sigh of relief. Zoe, looking up with the hasty idea of asking Maurice to get her some chocolate, by way of manufacturing another errand, saw to her delight the passengers returning hurriedly to the train. The dreaded twenty minutes was at an end.

"You know, I ran away," said Eirene softly to her, as the train glided out of the station.

"I thought so," responded Zoe; "but it can't have been so very bad, as you took your aunt with you."

"But I could never have gone alone!" in horror.

"No, I know it isn't usual," drily.

"Some day I will tell you how I did it," pursued

Eirene. "I thought I was safe, but if any of my precautions had failed, I knew it would be here they would catch me. Oh, and there is still another station before we are out of Vindobona! Begin another game, quickly!"

But the second station was comparatively unimportant, and the interval of terror of the briefest, and Zoe and Eirene released one another's hands, and pretended to Maurice that a sudden intense interest in chess had prevented their having any desire to look out at the city and its buildings. At dinner, notwithstanding Mrs Smith's objections, Wylie was accommodated with a temporary and most uncomfortable seat at the end of the table, and found himself very graciously treated, owing partly to Eirene's sense of relief from her fears, and partly to the alacrity with which he had assisted Maurice in running her errands at the station. The night passed without alarm, for though the Thracian frontier had to be crossed, the Customs examination was considerably delayed until the morning, though it was necessary to get it over before reaching Tatarjé, where the passengers for Therma changed into another train, the Express going on to Czarigrad. As she watched it out of sight, Zoe sighed that half the romance was gone out of the journey, for the new train was unknown to fame, and by no means comparable with the wonderful microcosm which had been their home for nearly two days. Moreover, it moved as deliberately as the most local of English local trains, and its rusty engine groaned complaints as it dragged itself reluctantly out of the station.

Tatarjé naturally called up memories of Count Mortimer, the great English Minister whom the young King of Thracia had discarded on attaining his majority, and who was one of Zoe's heroes. Wylie, who had

heard little of him, was quite willing to be instructed and to share her enthusiasm, but Eirene was contemptuous. It was easy for any man to rise to power when he served a Queen who was willing to resign everything into his hands, she said; dealing with men was another matter. The discussion which ensued was of the nature of those parallel lines which can never meet, for it appeared that Eirene's information was entirely derived from Scythian sources, and possessed nothing but the statesman's name in common with Zoe's. The crossing of the Roumi frontier gave a desirable change to the conversation, and Zoe sprang up to look out at "our own country," as she whispered to Maurice. Her own country received her inhospitably, for rain was falling in torrents, and the general aspect was bare and neglected in the extreme. A squalid little station reached early in the afternoon, apparently unconnected with any town or village, was crowded with Roumi soldiers, and Wylie's professional interest was aroused. He and Maurice left the carriage, taking with them all the cigarettes they possessed, and distributed them to the dripping, patient men. An elderly non-commissioned officer, who had been in Egypt, and recognising Wylie as a British officer, stood rigorously to attention when addressed, answered his questions in Arabic. The detachment had been ordered up to guard the railway, owing to a report that there was a band of Thracian revolutionaries in the neighbourhood with designs upon it. They had been at the station since early morning, without shelter or food, their uniforms ragged, their boots in holes. The station buildings were occupied by the Kaimakam of the district, under whose orders they were acting; he was immersed in business, but when he had time, would doubtless remember the needs of his troops. Some of

the younger and more impatient spirits had spoken of bribing his secretary to draw his attention to the matter, but apart from the fact that with their pay months in arrears they could not offer enough to tempt so great a man, the sergeant considered that such an attempt would be an improper interference with the decrees of destiny. He saluted smartly, and stood back among his men, a stolid, shivering figure of military virtue in evil case.

"Some of the best material in the world!" said Wylie wrathfully to Maurice. "What soldiers we could make of them in India! British troops would have mutinied six hours ago. Look at the two sick men in that goods-shed, with the rain falling on them—and the Kaimakam, no doubt, is soothing himself with *hashish* in the station-master's quarters!"

"Let's go and rout him out, and shame him into putting the men in shelter," said Maurice.

Wylie shook his head. "I daren't," he said. "It would only mean quartering them upon the Christian inhabitants of the village over there. That's what's bound to be done at last, I suppose, but one wouldn't care for the responsibility of hurrying it on."

He looked over the straggling houses of the place, which was visible at this point round the shoulder of a hill, flat-roofed, dingy white, huddled together apparently for the sake of company rather than protection, then brought his eyes back to the face of the old sergeant, who had advanced and was saluting again.

"Is the Bimbashi Bey come hither to serve in the new Gendarmerie?" he asked respectfully.

"No; merely to visit a friend," answered Wylie.

"God be praised!" responded the old man, with evident satisfaction.

"Now why?" demanded Maurice, when Wylie had translated the question. "Make him say."

The sergeant needed some pressing, but at length gave his reason boldly. "The Bey Effendi's eyes are of the cruel colour," he said. "Never have I beheld eyes more cruel, and I have seen many men."

Wylie's disconcerted face made Maurice insist upon a translation, which delighted him extremely. "Ask the old blighter if he really believes that rot," he demanded.

"The Bimbashi Bey's eyes will indeed strike terror into his enemies, so that they will flee before him and he will grind them to powder," returned the sergeant, anxious to be conciliatory. "But his own men would fain see his eyes like those of the young Effendi, his friend."

"There! They think you're squeezable, you see," said Wylie in triumph. "When you're made High Commissioner of Emathia, you'd better send for me to be your commander-in-chief, and put a little stiffening into you."

"All right. Mind, it's a bargain!" cried Maurice, returning to the train at the summons of the guard, and smiling to think how closely Wylie's jest had approached the possible truth.

"Oh, Maurice, it's an omen!" came in an awestruck whisper from Zoe, who had been at the window.

"A fiddlestick!" responded Maurice lightly. "Now for thrilling mountain scenery, with revolutionary bands thrown in gratis!"

The train was now entering the mountains, and the four young people established themselves at the corridor window, which presented the most extensive views, but Mrs Smith refused to leave the compartment. Emathia possessed the most brutal and savage

scenery in the world, she declared, and it made her shiver even to look at it. She would endeavour to forget it, and if a French novel and slumber are aids to forgetfulness, it was not long before she did so. The prospect from her side of the carriage was certainly not inspiring, since it was limited to the rocky cliff in which the track had been blasted out, but on the other side there was something like a view, as Maurice said. From the very edge of the line, dark woods sank down, down, to depths which the eye could not penetrate, rising again on the other side of the valley to heights behind which the sun was already setting, at barely five o'clock on a summer afternoon. In one or two places there was a glimpse of foaming water, but generally the woods alone were visible. They made her feel weird, Zoe said; it was like an enchanted forest. She did not mind going through them in the train, but to think of venturing into them on foot was enough to make the bravest heart quail.

"We ought to reach the great viaduct which crosses the river presently," said Wylie. "I believe the line winds so much just there that from this end of the train you see the engine and the first half apparently at right angles with you as it enters on the bridge."

"There it is!" cried Eirene presently. She and Zoe were sitting on the seat below the window, Maurice and Wylie standing behind them. They all looked out eagerly to see the famous bridge, and withdrew their heads again laughing, with ruffled hair, for in this narrow valley the wind was strong. Eirene drew back to adjust a hairpin, the two men were laughing at one another's dishevelled aspect, and only Zoe was still looking out when that happened which she would never forget, though she could not determine exactly

the sequence of the several events. In anticipation of the appearance of the head of the train, she was keeping her eyes fixed upon the bridge, when the end nearest her rose suddenly in the air, suddenly and, as it seemed, quietly. She had opened her mouth to cry, "Look at the bridge!" when the words were drowned by the sound of an explosion, which must have been simultaneous with the upheaval, but seemed to follow at a perceptible interval. The train rocked and staggered, the glass from the windows and lamps shivered and fell in showers with a curious tinkling noise, Maurice and Wylie were thrown violently across the corridor. Zoe found herself and Eirene on their feet, gazing at one another with dilated eyes, heard Wylie shout to them angrily to sit down, had a vague idea that the train had left the metals and was trying to climb the mountain—or what was the meaning of those agonised jerks which felt like earthquakes? She knew that she was saying something foolish—"the hill above the line was not quite so steep here, was it?"—but the words were frozen on her lips. The floor was slipping away beneath her, the place where the window had been was somehow rising to the roof, then there came a great crash, a sensation of falling through space, and all was silence.

CHAPTER V.

THE JEWEL-CASE.

WHEN Zoe came to herself, the first sensation of which she was conscious was a stinging taste in her mouth, the next the dark woods cutting the sky opposite her. She cried out weakly, and closed her eyes to shut out the sight.

"That's right!" said a voice. "How do you feel?"

"All smashed up," she murmured feebly.

"Nonsense! Stretch out your arms!" The tone was so peremptory that she obeyed mechanically. "Now your feet," and she gave two spasmodic kicks. "You're all right," said the voice, which was gradually becoming familiar. "A little more brandy?"

"Oh, no!" said Zoe in disgust, wriggling away from the offered flask, and discovering that her head was supported on Wylie's arm. "I'm quite well now. Did I faint? Where's Maurice? Oh!" as recollection rushed upon her, "is Maurice safe?"

"He's all right, helping to dig out your sister. We could hear her voice, and I left him to get her out, while I brought you up here. Now I am going to get you something for a pillow, and then I shall leave you."

Raising herself with difficulty on her elbow, Zoe found that she was lying on a steep bank of stones

and rubble, sparsely covered with grass. Below her was the wrecked train, lying on its side on the slope. Men were standing on the sides of the carriages and dragging others through the holes where the windows had been, or thrusting aside distorted pieces of iron and masses of splintered wood. Some of the rescued were sitting on the slope bemoaning themselves, or stanching wounds in head or hands with their handkerchiefs; others were being carried towards a tree at one side, under which a man in his shirt-sleeves was bending over a woman lying on the ground. Thus much Zoe was able to see before Wylie ran up the bank again with a small box, which had been thrown aside out of the way of the rescuers, in his hand.

"I'll put this under your head," he said hastily, "and with that big stone at your feet you won't slip down the bank. Just shut your eyes and lie quiet, and the shock will soon pass off."

"Can't I come down and help?" asked Zoe.

"No, no. Keep out of the way, that's the best thing you can do. I'll call you when we get your sister out."

Zoe disobeyed him only so far as to watch the men at work on the train until she had distinguished Maurice, and then lay down, unable to repress a hysterical little laugh at the thought of Wylie's sending him to the rescue of a stranger while she was left to the care of others. It was not long before she heard herself summoned.

"Miss Smith, we are taking your sister to the doctor. She is hurt, but I hope not badly. You would like to come?"

Rising unsteadily to her feet, she was glad to accept the aid of Wylie's hand down the slope. Eirene was half unconscious, and moaned when she was touched,

and Maurice and Wylie carried her to the improvised field-hospital, where a French surgeon, who had fortunately been among the passengers, was giving such aid as he could to the injured. One or two ladies who had escaped unhurt were tearing up their dust-cloaks for temporary bandages, and behind the tree at the back lay several quiet forms, reverently covered with rugs and macintoshes hastily collected. Zoe shivered at the sight, but the doctor had no time to waste. Discovering that Eirene's most serious injury was a dislocated shoulder, he reduced the dislocation by rough and ready means, and bound her arm tightly into place, then told Zoe to take her away, since cuts and contusions must await a more opportune moment for treatment. Maurice came forward to help her, and whispered to the doctor, who nodded vigorously.

"By all means get her to bed as soon as possible. An emotional temperament—I have observed it myself—fever very likely to supervene. I will see that she goes with the first batch of wounded.

But as Maurice and Wylie laid her gently on the slope, Eirene struggled into a sitting position. "My jewel-case!" she screamed. "My jewel-case! where is it?"

"It must be in the carriage still," said Maurice. "We shall come upon it."

"Bring it to me!" she cried angrily. "I must have it."

"It will be found," said Zoe soothingly, "but no one has seen it yet. Don't worry yourself, Eirene; it will be all right." Her tone had grown a little impatient, for she had gathered from Maurice's whisper to the doctor that Mrs Smith was among the killed, and Eirene had not even asked after her.

"It is lost, stolen!" cried Eirene. "I threw it out

of the window when the train began to turn over. Offer a reward, quickly—a million francs, anything!”

“Your wealth must be greater than your prudence, mademoiselle, or you would hardly carry such valuables about with you,” remarked the doctor drily. Like every one else in her immediate vicinity, he had been attracted by Eirene’s shriek.

“They are all I have in the world. My jewels are everything to me,” she cried wildly. “I will not leave this place without them. I will search the line on my hands and knees. It is marked ‘E. E. Smith’—a small box covered with leather, with brass ornaments. Has no one seen it?”

Zoe gave a gasp, and seized Maurice’s arm, pointing to the box as it lay neglected high up the slope. The next moment he had fetched it down, and between tears and laughter she restored it to its owner.

“Oh, Eirene, I am so sorry! Captain Wylie brought it me for a pillow, and I hadn’t an idea what it was. But when you mentioned brass ornaments, I remembered how uncomfortable the handle was. Now it’s all right, isn’t it?”

Eirene lay down, almost fainting, but gripping the box, while the bystanders dispersed, whispering and muttering, and much disappointed with this tame conclusion. Communication had now been established with the nearest station—a mere hill-hamlet, compared with which the village where the Roumi soldiers were to be quartered was a town—and presently a trolley came down the line with an official and several workmen. They brought the news that help had been telegraphed for from the larger station, but that it was not likely to amount to more than an engine and open trucks, which might not arrive that night. It was, therefore, for the passengers to choose

whether they would remain where they were, or walk back to the small station in company with the men in charge of the trolley. The purpose which this was intended to serve was quickly evident, for several heavy cases were extracted with great difficulty from a locked van, which had been specially guarded since the accident, and piled upon it. The doctor obtained leave for Eirene and three other passengers, whose injuries were not so severe as to prevent their sitting up, to use the chests as seats, and they were lifted to their places as gently as possible, Eirene gripping the jewel-case fast in her uninjured hand. The passengers who chose to walk were asked to keep close to the trolley, so as to form a guard, headed by the two armed officials who were in charge of the treasure. Owing to the prohibition of the import of arms, Wylie had sent his regulation weapons by sea, and though both he and Maurice had brought sporting guns (which it had cost them much time and trouble to get through the customs), these could not yet be extricated from the confused heap of luggage in the train. Wylie had a miniature revolver, from which a long experience of danger had taught him never to separate himself, and he showed it reassuringly to Zoe as they set out, lighted in the gathering twilight by the fires kindled on the banks for the passengers who chose to remain by the train.

"Why, what is there to be afraid of?" she asked him. "Wolves?"

"Possibly; but I didn't mean to frighten you, only to calm your fears if you had any."

"Wylie doesn't follow the bewildering changes of your mind," said Maurice, who was carrying Zoe's dressing-bag, the only thing they had been able to bring. "You professed to be afraid of the forest

when you were perfectly safe in the train, but now you seem to think it rather a lark to be walking through it at this particularly ghostly hour."

"Oh no, I know what you mean," cried Zoe, "the people who destroyed the bridge! You do think it was done on purpose, then?"

"Dynamite, undoubtedly," returned Wylie, "worked by one of those clockwork arrangements which are timed to go off at a certain moment. This one went off about forty seconds too soon. The guard actually saw the bridge blow up, and had just time to put the brakes on hard. If the train had been on the bridge, as the fiends who laid the dynamite intended, not a soul would have escaped."

"I saw it too," said Zoe, with a shudder. "And who do you think it was?"

"Why, the Thracian revolutionaries we heard of from the sergeant, of course," said Maurice. "The troops had been carefully got out of the way by a false alarm, and the bridge was left defenceless. It was very neatly arranged. They were saying at the train that all these Thracian bands are under the orders of the Bishop of Tatarjé, who is a great pan-Slavist."

"But what good would it have done them to destroy a whole train-load of people who had nothing to do with their troubles?" said Zoe. "Were they after the treasure?"

"Very likely," said Wylie. "Money means more dynamite and more rifles. But even if it had all gone down into the river and been lost, the moral effect on Europe of the destruction of a train like this would have been immense. It would have called attention to their grievances, and advertised them as heroes who stick at nothing."

"And you think they may be hiding in the trees now?"

"No, since their blow failed, I should imagine they are off double-quick march to some other part of the country, so as to establish a serviceable alibi. But even if they were here, I don't think we look worth attacking."

"We are a disreputable lot," said Maurice, trying to scan his torn hands and ragged clothes in the twilight. "You will have to doctor our wounds and bruises when we get to the station, Zoe. She is one of those people who pride themselves on travelling with a specimen of every conceivable kind of thing that may possibly be wanted," he explained to Wylie, "so she is sure to have plaster."

"Plenty in my luggage, but only a little here," said Zoe, "so we must use it economically. "I suppose," she added nervously, "you don't think they may be lying in wait somewhere in front to get the treasure?"

"Not a bit of it," said Wylie. "We are prepared for them now, and they know it. And to-morrow, I understand, the treasure is to be sent on at once with an armed escort. If I may offer a piece of advice, it is that the jewellery your sister is so anxious about should be sent on too."

"She will never part with it," said Zoe, with conviction. "Oh, don't look at me as if I could persuade her. If I had the least influence over her, do you think she would be carrying it about with her as she does?"

"We are almost strangers to her, you see," explained Maurice rather lamely. "We can't expect to have much influence."

"Well, it seems to me to be distinctly a case for the exercise of fraternal authority. Make him speak

seriously to her, Miss Smith, and not shove off all the disagreeable things on you. I'm afraid you'll have a bad time breaking the news of Mrs Smith's death to your sister. By the bye, she was not your aunt, was she?"

"Oh no, no relation to us whatever," said Zoe.

"We never met her before this journey," added Maurice.

"That was what I said to myself when I saw you first," said Wylie to Zoe. "Then her being named Smith was merely a coincidence?"

"Purely a coincidence," said Zoe emphatically, and Maurice added, "You must think us a queer set."

"Not at all," returned Wylie politely and falsely.

"Oh, but you must!" cried Zoe. "I am sure, if we met ourselves, we should think we were the most extraordinary family that ever lived. But how can we help it?"

"One's family is one of the things that have to be lived down," said Wylie, with the kindest intentions, and went on to give instances in point from the history of people he had known, while Maurice and Zoe wished vainly that they could explain the true state of affairs—vainly, for how could they betray the history of their acquaintance with Eirene without her consent?

"It's awful, Maurice," lamented Zoe afterwards. "What will he think when he sees us separate at Therma, or if he ever meets her without us, or us without her? It will seem as if we had deliberately deceived him all along."

But this was after they had arrived at the village, and accepted without enthusiasm the only quarters available. The Han, or inn, might have served satisfactorily to accommodate one or two sportsmen who

did not mind roughing it, but now, invaded by a crowd of tired, hungry travellers, many of them bringing nothing but the clothes they wore, its resources were hopelessly overtaxed. The railway officials, securing Wylie, whose experience they recognised, as an ally, set to work to house their charges as best they could. The long loft which formed the upper storey of the inn was devoted to the ladies, and all the beds in the establishment—which were not above suspicion—were transferred thither, while rugs and sacks were requisitioned to provide couches for the men below. Bowls of coarse porridge, and platters of hastily boiled mutton, were forthcoming after a time, meal and a sheep having been commandeered from the neighbourhood, but there were no knives and forks, and spoons quickly ran short. Wylie shared in the abuse heaped upon the railway management, who ought, it appeared, to have provided a perfectly equipped hotel, with restaurant, hair-dressing saloons, bathrooms, and a large stock of borrowable clothing, at this particular spot, but he went on his way with a polite smile and unbending courtesy, arranging for breakfast on the morrow. Bare-footed, untidy girls, called in to help, fell over one another on the ladder-like staircase, or stood saucer-eyed to watch the “European” ladies and gentlemen, seated most uncomfortably on the floor, and grumbling over what seemed to Emathian minds a highly luxurious banquet. Hot water was absolutely unattainable, even if there had been cans to contain it, and the brushes and combs of such passengers as possessed them were passed from hand to hand for the benefit of the less fortunate. Zoe was happy in escaping early from the turmoil, for being in charge of Eirene, she was allowed to take her upstairs as soon as a bed could be pre-

pared, and Maurice brought them a bowl of broth—or rather, water in which the mutton had been boiled—with pieces of meat floating in it. Eirene would eat nothing. While they sat outside the Han, waiting for the loft to be got ready, she had raised her head suddenly from Zoe's shoulder, as if waking from a stupor, and demanded—

"Where is Evdotia Vladimirovna? I have not seen her."

"I—I think she stayed behind, at the bridge," stammered Zoe.

"Is she wounded? She would not have left me to you. What is the matter with her? Is she dead?"

Zoe struggled to say something, and failed, and Eirene read the truth from her broken accents.

"She is dead, then?" she said. "And I made her come with me!"

She would say nothing more, and the tears for which Zoe hoped would not come. Eirene allowed herself to be helped upstairs, and lay down obediently, but not to sleep. When the noise and confusion that reigned throughout the inn had at last subsided, Zoe was roused by hearing her voice. Sometimes she spoke in French or English, sometimes in an unknown tongue, which Zoe thought must be Scythian, rambling on and on, and moaning pitifully. Once she called out for her jewel-case, and Zoe, fearing that the other passengers would be disturbed, rose and brought it to her, leaving it on the bed, so that she might be sure it was safe. She held long conversations with some one, apparently urging some course of action, and Zoe guessed that her mind was recurring to the difficulty she had experienced in inducing Mrs Smith to accompany her on her quest, whatever it was. The delirium had passed off in the morning, but Eirene

remained weak and feverish, and Zoe welcomed the appearance of the doctor, who came up from the scene of the accident with the rest of his patients in the emergency train as soon as it was light. Bustle was everywhere again, and the officials and Wylie had their hands full in producing order out of chaos. The most serious cases among the injured were to be sent back to Tatarje, while those who were only slightly wounded, and the unhurt, were to proceed by road as fast as carriages could be provided to convey them, following the old route through the mountains which had preceded the railway, crossing the river by a Roman bridge at some distance lower down, and re-joining the line at the nearest station on the other side, where a train would be waiting to take them on to Therma. This would have been the natural course for Maurice and Zoe to follow, but there was Eirene to consider, and Zoe felt no surprise when the doctor remarked airily—

"She must not be moved, of course. A few days' perfect rest and freedom from strain is necessary. You will be able to renew the dressings, mademoiselle, and I will leave you sufficient material. Your interesting sister is in no danger, but she will certainly not be fit to travel for a week."

"Of course we must stay and look after her," said Maurice, when he heard the verdict. "We can't leave her here alone."

This was Zoe's own opinion, but for some reason Maurice's ready agreement displeased her. "She has no claim on us whatever," she said, rather tartly. "She simply tacked herself on to us."

"What a low thing to say!" cried Maurice, really angry. "And the poor little girl in such trouble!"

"Of course she's in trouble, but whose fault is it?

You may say what you like, but you know you'd be horribly, frightfully angry if I went running about Europe and hooked myself on to a strange man and his sister."

"That would be quite different. I mean, it would be quite different with strangers. She had sense enough to pick out us. At any rate"—Maurice had a dim idea that there was something not quite conclusive about his argument—"we ought to be very thankful that she did."

"We? Scarcely. But I think she ought," snapped Zoe, and having permitted herself this licence, set to work to atone for it. "Don't look so righteously angry, Maurice. I never dreamed for a moment of leaving her alone here; only it struck me all at once how different it would have seemed to you if I had been in her place. Don't be afraid; I'll be her guide, philosopher, and friend as long as she'll let me, and hand her over to her parents and guardians a reformed character, when they turn up at last."

"Yes, one forgets that," said Maurice, with what Zoe felt was unnecessary solemnity, and she turned away a little hastily.

"Is she going to come between Maurice and me?" she asked herself. "No, that she can't do unless I let her. She isn't a bad child, really—for a child, always seeing how far she can go, and half frightened at the things she does, and expecting other people to take the responsibility. I do wonder who she really is."

"Good morning," said Wylie, meeting her. "You look none the worse for your adventures, I'm glad to see. I met the doctor just now. Horribly bad luck for you to be fixed here. I hope you are not anxious about your sister?"

"The doctor says it is only rest she needs, thank

you. I suppose this is 'good-bye'?" noticing that he was equipped for a journey.

"Not exactly. I'm only going down with your brother to see if we can disinter your family luggage from the wreck. Er—I found I was more knocked about than I thought," as Zoe looked at him in surprise, "and I thought a—a little rest wouldn't do me any harm, so I'm staying on too—if you don't mind, that is?"

"Why should I mind?" asked Zoe coolly. "I think it will be very nice for my brother to have a companion, as I shall be so much taken up. I hope you are not seriously hurt?"

"Oh no, no—nothing at all," he assured her. "I am sending a message to my friend not to expect me just yet. Oh, by the bye, they will soon be packing off the treasure. What about your sister's jewel-case? It has been a good deal talked of already, and the villagers are prepared to regard your party as possessed of illimitable wealth. I really think we should be safer without it."

"I'll speak to her at once," said Zoe, as she mounted the stair. By way of proceeding in a gentle and diplomatic manner, she began by telling Eirene that Wylie was remaining with them, which seemed to fill her with compunction.

"I have not deserved this fidelity," she said feebly, "for I have never shown him any special distinction. But he shall not go unrewarded. Oh," meeting Zoe's astonished and rather indignant eyes, "I forgot; he does not know. But his intention is kind."

"He thinks you had better send your jewel-case on with the treasure, and get it placed in safety," said Zoe bluntly, unreasonably irritated by Eirene's assumption that Wylie was staying on her account.

"Never!" said Eirene decisively. "I won't part with it."

"Oh, very well. Every one is talking about it, and the revolutionaries are sure to hear. Then they will come and besiege the inn, and you will have to give it up."

"Not while I live."

"Well, if you think Maurice and Captain Wylie—or any one—would sacrifice the lives of a whole houseful of people just for the sake of your jewels, I don't."

Eirene wavered a little. "What does Maurice say?" she asked.

"He thinks, as I do, that if you are our sister, your brother's wishes ought to have some effect on you."

"If I only knew they would be safe!" sighed Eirene.

"Why, they are sure to be safe. You will be given a receipt for them, I expect, and then the railway people would be responsible."

"If I thought that——!" Eirene was still gripping the box. "Zoe, will you find out at once? If the railway people will guarantee the safety of the case, I will entrust it to them."

Much relieved by this reasonable attitude, Zoe went downstairs again, found the official in charge of the treasure, obtained all possible assurances from him, and returned to Eirene, who had opened the jewel-case, and with reluctant fingers was rearranging its more obvious contents—the trinkets which, as she had told the French lady, had belonged to her mother—in their proper places.

"Take it quickly, before I change my mind," she said, locking it hastily.

CHAPTER VI.

A TRAP.

THE week's stay at the Han was drawing to a close. Twice the train from "Europe" had deposited its passengers at the station, and they had been sent on by road, as those of the wrecked train had been, to rejoin the line on the other side of the river. Gangs of navvies were at work on the repairs to the bridge, and the passage of construction-trains kept the station staff busy. Maurice and Wylie had extricated as much as possible of their possessions and those of the girls from the pile of damaged and partially plundered luggage (for the navvies had enjoyed first choice) rescued from among the *débris*, and the village carpenter found himself overworked, or so he asserted, with orders for making new boxes and repairing others. The party at the inn had been increased by the addition of Haji Ahmad, a trusted Roumi servant of Wylie's friend Captain Palmer, who had been sent to make himself generally useful, which he did. Poor Mrs Smith had been buried in the neglected churchyard, a ragged and dirty priest hurrying through a service which seemed little more intelligible to himself than to the three English who listened, and displaying an indecent keenness as to the fees due to him.

"Eirene," said Zoe, on the fifth day of their stay,

"Maurice wanted me to ask you what you would like put on the tombstone. He has found a man who can carve letters, and he would like to make sure that it is properly done before we leave."

"'Evdofia Vladimirovna'—nothing else," replied Eirene, after a moment's reflection. "Some day I shall build a memorial church here, to commemorate her fidelity, but it is not the time for that yet."

Zoe wondered silently whether the poor lady might not have preferred a peaceful life to this honoured death, and Eirene caught her look. "You know that she was not really my aunt?" she said doubtfully.

"I have thought it might be so," returned Zoe.

"She was my mother's—companion," said Eirene, hesitating over the word, "and then she was one of my governesses. I was obliged to tell her what I meant to do, and she could not let me come alone. I said I should go without her, but of course I could not have done it. I knew she would come sooner than that. And I told her what to do, and she really tried to do it. You don't know how cunningly I laid my plans!" with sudden enthusiasm. "I made use of my father's steward to take passages to America for us from Havre, and get American passports for us as Mrs Silas Lapham and Miss Philadelphia Lapham, and to transfer money in that name to a bank in New York. He is a Jew, and I knew that however heavily I bribed him to silence, he would betray me if he found himself in danger, so I let him think he was wholly in my confidence, and yet I never trusted him at all. Through an English merchant with whom my father had dealings, I got these English passports, and then all was clear. We had been staying at a French watering-place, and we left it in our proper characters and embarked on the Nord Express. Our maids went

on unsuspectingly with the luggage to—where we used to live, but Evdotia Vladimirovna and I had left the train at the first stopping-place and returned to Paris. A duplicate set of luggage was sent through to Havre in the name of Lapham, to make further confusion, while we, with entirely different luggage, took tickets for the Orient Express as Mrs and Miss Smith. I knew that if Levinssohn betrayed us, he could only direct pursuit to Havre, where the false luggage would be stopped; but it would be some days before they would suspect we were not coming that way at all, and by that time our traces in Paris would be lost. I was foolish in being so frightened at Vindobona, for it was most unlikely that my precautions should have failed, but it was terrible to think that after such a bold stroke I might be dragged back."

"Well, I only hope you had a good reason for it all," was Zoe's unsympathetic rejoinder. Eirene looked offended.

"Arrangements were proposed for me which I could not possibly accept," she said, with much dignity. "My reasons were absolutely valid, as you will acknowledge if I ever explain them to you. I should like to justify myself by doing so now, but it is out of the question, unless—— Zoe," she broke off suddenly, "it occurs to me sometimes that you and Maurice may not be what you seem. You also—I mean, you yourselves—may be travelling *incognito*. If it was so——?"

The possibilities of the situation flew through Zoe's mind as Eirene's voice ceased. If she were to make a bargain—to exchange her secret for Eirene's? But the secret was not hers alone, but Maurice's, and Wylie was still in ignorance of it. Besides, what if Eirene were really the spy she had at first imagined

her, and this was a bold bid on her part for success in her nefarious schemes? Zoe's decision was taken in an instant. "You mustn't be so fanciful," she said. "Maurice and I have lived the most unromantic life you can imagine. He is really an English country gentleman, as he has told you. We do really live in a nice, square, ugly, old Georgian house, with good grounds. When we are ambitious we call them the park. We have a good many tenants, who are a continual bother through wanting things done for them and not paying their rents. We are exactly like our neighbours, except that we have both been to college." A prudential instinct, for which she commended herself, restrained her from mentioning the Gold Medal, though she had already exulted in Wylie's undisguised astonishment when he was made acquainted with Maurice's poetical fame.

Eirene sighed. "I am so sorry," she said. "I had fancied— There is something so striking about your brother—a mingling of strength and gentleness and carelessness—no, that is the wrong word; *insouciance* is what I mean—that I could not help hoping he was really noble."

The temptation to reveal the truth was so overwhelming that Zoe took refuge in a highly moral tone. "You have such a horribly snobbish way of looking at things," she said severely, "thinking whether people are noble instead of whether they are nice. Maurice and Captain Wylie are English gentlemen, and an English gentleman is the equal of any one in the world."

"And an English lady?" demanded Eirene smartly.

"Superior to any one in the world, I should think, judging by the way in which foreign royalties employ, English governesses," retorted Zoe.

"I had an English governess," said Eirene, closing her eyes languidly. "She was very highly connected, she said so; and she believed that one of the foresters—gamekeepers, you say?—was in love with her. She used to drop her handkerchief for him to pick up."

"Poor thing! No doubt she wanted some consolation—or perhaps she was going crazy," said Zoe. "I expect you led her a life."

"You consider me very unamiable?" asked Eirene curiously. "Tell me, then; what do you think of me, honestly?"

"I don't think you are unamiable really, but you seem to think of no one but yourself, and you are always thinking of yourself. You told me to say what I thought."

"I know; I suppose it is true. You consider me selfish. Well, I will try to improve. And to begin, I beg you will go to Maurice and ask him from me to take you for a long walk. I have kept you too much with me."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Zoe, laughing; "it's very nice here. I'm not going to leave you all alone."

"I insist that you go. And don't fear my being dull. I have much to do, for I must mend my skirt before I put it on to-morrow. Pray leave me your workbox."

"Why, I never noticed it," said Zoe, turning to the skirt as it hung on the wall. Five or six inches of braid were hanging in a loop. "But I'll do it for you in a minute."

"No," said Eirene stiffly, "you are not my maid."

"Then we'll do it together, if you are so proud. But you can't work with one hand in a sling."

"It is only the left, and it will suffice to hold the work," persisted Eirene. "Go!" she cried, with sudden anger. "I will not have you criticising my

untidy stitches. I will do it by myself, if it takes me till dark."

Shrugging her shoulders, Zoe took her hat and left the room. When she returned at dusk, after a glorious walk through the hills, Eirene had accomplished her task, and was trying the skirt on. Zoe looked at it in surprise.

"Why, how funny it looks!" she said. "You must have puckered it dreadfully. It sticks out in such a queer way above the hem. Let me pull it down."

She knelt to try and twitch the folds into place, but Eirene pulled them away pettishly.

"How tiresome you are, Zoe! It will look all right. I have put in some weights to keep it down better. If you don't call attention to it, nobody will notice, and it will fall perfectly when I have worn it a day or two."

"Well, I must say I don't admire your tailoring," said Zoe, rising from her knees. "You must have put in too many weights. Your tailor would simply break his heart if he saw that skirt. I believe I could have done it better, though I don't profess to be great at sewing."

"I have arranged it as I like it," said Eirene, with so much dignity that her companion dropped the subject, though the ill-hung skirt was an eyesore to her all the next day, when Eirene came downstairs and was escorted on a short walk through the village. On the following day they left the Han to resume their interrupted journey, but intending to spend a night at the station on the other side of the river, lest Eirene should be over-tired by the long drive. They took only their hand-luggage with them in the carriage, leaving the larger boxes to follow with those of the passengers who would be due to join the train the next morning. The whole population of the village seemed

to have turned out to see them start, from the priest to the most slipshod drudge at the inn, and Zoe flattered herself that they presented an imposing appearance, with Haji Ahmad, armed to the teeth, on the box beside the driver. The carriage itself, a nondescript vehicle of the victoria species, stood much in need of a visit to the coachbuilder's, but it was large enough to allow of Eirene's being made comfortable with cushions, and Wylie gave it as his mature opinion that, with reasonable care on the driver's part, it ought to hold out until the end of the day. The road did not lead through the dark forests of evergreen oak, but through much more cheerful beechwoods, and the scenery was less savage than that in the river-gorge. It was just like a picnic, Zoe declared, and she only wished they could finish their journey to Therma in this way instead of by train.

About noon they stopped to change horses, and ate their lunch in a rickety shelter of poles and vines attached in lean-to fashion to the post-station. A little beyond this the road divided, presenting a fairly steep ascent on the right, and a more gradual descent on the left. The driver took the road to the right without hesitation, and Maurice and Wylie and Haji Ahmad got out to make it easier for the horses. Maurice walked by the side of the carriage, chatting with the girls, but Wylie and the servant fell behind, and it seemed to Zoe that they were talking earnestly. When the top of the hill was reached, showing a prospect of further hills, the road through which was barely distinguishable, Wylie went forward and spoke sharply to the driver, using a jargon of his own invention of broken Thracian helped out with Roumi and Arabic words, in which he had managed to make himself understood at the Han. The driver answered at

first only by a broad stare and a look of bewilderment, but presently his face cleared, and he poured forth a torrent of words, gesticulating vehemently with his whip. The explanation he offered seemed to satisfy Wylie, though Haji Ahmad still looked uneasy as he climbed to his place. As soon as Wylie was in the carriage again, Zoe asked him what had passed.

"Haji Ahmad thought we were taking the wrong road," he answered lightly, "but the driver says this is shorter than the other, and the landlord told him to take it in order to make the journey as short as possible for your sister."

"But it is much rougher," objected Zoe.

"So I told him, but he says that he had not allowed for our stopping for lunch, and that to go back down that long hill would lose so much time that we shouldn't get in till after dark, which would be no joke on these roads. I don't think there's any fear of his losing himself. As he says, it's obvious that both roads lead to the river and the Roman bridge, though this one goes across the hill and the other goes round it."

Maurice and Eirene had scarcely noticed what had been said, and under cover of their talk and laughter Zoe ventured to ask, "But what if he did lead us wrong?"

"I'm afraid I should be guilty of conniving at Roumi oppression, and leave him to Haji Ahmad to deal with," said Wylie, laughing. They went on into the hills, the track becoming rougher as they advanced, until Maurice wedged Eirene in with all the luggage of the party, that she might not be thrown out. Zoe heard Wylie muttering maledictions on the driver under his breath, and saw him casting glances alternately at the sun and the way they had come, evidently calculating whether there was time even now to retrace their steps.

The driver was obviously anxious to escape as soon as possible from the resentment of his passengers, who were being rattled about like peas in a pod, for he was driving furiously, making the dilapidated carriage bound from hillock to hollow. Zoe looked across at Wylie, and, raising her voice, asked if he could not tell the man to go more quietly; but before he could turn his head, the driver had disappeared suddenly from her view. Something whirled over the carriage, sweeping Haji Ahmad from the box to the ground with a clatter of weapons, and the driver was in his place again as if by magic, pulling up his horses frantically in obedience to hoarse shouts in front. He must have ducked to avoid a rope fastened across the road, was Zoe's last coherent thought. The carriage stopped violently, half across the track, and events came with a rush. Zoe saw Maurice and Wylie spring up from their seats, saw Maurice felled with the butt-end of a gun, and Wylie raging, furiously helpless, in a noose which the driver had dexterously thrown over him, pinioning his arms to his sides. Huge, hairy hands seized her and Eirene, dragged them out and flung them roughly on the ground, while fierce voices cursed them by saints with uncouth names. A wild struggle was going on, and the two prostrate girls were undoubtedly in the way, so that they were trampled upon impartially by both sides. Zoe had an awful glimpse of Haji Ahmad, his face streaming with blood, fighting desperately for his life, before she succeeded in dragging herself out of the fray, to find Maurice flung aside stunned and bleeding, and Eirene, who had fallen on her wounded arm, moaning faintly. The mob of ruffians in dirty white kilts who were yelling and struggling round the carriage paid no attention to her, and she crept towards the other two.

"Don't look that way—don't!" cried Wylie, breaking out of the crowd and thrusting himself between her and them—a ludicrous figure enough, with torn coat, no hat, and arms bound tightly behind him. "That's all right," as she lifted Maurice's head. "There's a flask in my pocket if you can get at it. Buck up, Miss Eirene! Don't let these fellows hear an English girl making that noise."

"I am not English!" cried Eirene, sitting up indignantly. "At least, I mean— Oh, what are they doing?" as a single awful cry of agony came from the centre of the throng of robbers, and made Zoe almost drop the flask.

"Don't look, don't look!" entreated Wylie. "That's it, Miss Smith, try and get a drop into his mouth. Now, Miss Eirene"—sharply—"can't you unfasten your brother's collar; and hold up his head?"

"I'll do it," said Zoe, as Eirene touched Maurice's tie delicately; "you take the flask. Oh!" stopping short with trembling fingers, as a second and feebler cry was heard.

"It's over now, at any rate," said Wylie, setting his lips. "Get your brother's head tied up quickly, before these fiends have time to remember us. Each man is bound to give the poor wretch a stab, dead though he may be."

"Is it Haji Ahmad?" asked Zoe faintly, as she folded her handkerchief into a pad.

"Yes. A Roumi need expect no mercy from these fellows. Take my handkerchief for a bandage; it's larger than yours. Oh, good heavens! have you no knife or scissors that you could cut this rope with, and give me a chance to stand up to them when they turn round?"

"In the carriage?" suggested Zoe, measuring the

distance with her eye. "Oh, Maurice has a knife, of course."

"Leave it, leave it!" he cried quickly; "they're coming. Stand up if you can, Smith," as Maurice opened his eyes feebly. "No, it's no good. Keep quiet."

He stood before the girls, and it seemed to Zoe that the advancing robbers quailed when they met his eye, and shuffled their blood-stained yataghans out of sight, as though suddenly conscious of the awful mass on the ground behind them.

"Can any of you speak English?" he cried.

"Me—a leetle," said a small, slim man, pushing his way to the front.

"What do you want with us?"

"We take all you got, zen get moch money for you," was the reply, given with an ingratiating grin.

"So I thought. Well, I have this to say to you. You can pillage my friend and me if you like, but you won't lay a finger upon the ladies. They will turn out their pockets and show you what they've got, and you can take what you want."

The interpreter turned to his friends, apparently not sorry to escape from Wylie's glance, and explained the terms to them. Absurd though it seemed, the will of the bound and defenceless prisoner prevailed above the murmurs that arose, and the interpreter undertook, on behalf of the chief of the band, that the girls should not be searched if Wylie would swear on the Evangelists that they had given up everything.

"Turn out your pockets, quickly," he said to them, as two of the men seized him, and two others dragged Maurice to his feet and propped him against a tree.

"I won't!" cried Eirene, her eyes flaming.

"Nonsense! you must. Didn't you hear me promise

for you?" He spoke with difficulty, trying to turn round while his captors thrust and pulled him about.

"I don't care. I never gave you leave to make promises for me. If they touch me, I'll kill them."

What she held in her hand neither Zoe nor Wylie could see, but the brigands were clamouring and the interpreter insistent.

"Let me talk to her," cried Wylie, wrenching himself, with his collar loose and his coat hanging by one sleeve, from the hands that held him. "Look here, Miss Eirene, you must. You are not going to expose your sister to the risk of being searched by these fellows?"

"She can do as she likes. I won't be searched, and I will give up nothing."

"Smith, make your sister behave rationally. She will have all our blood on her head in a minute." Maurice, held up by the two men who were searching him, made an effort to speak, but in vain, and Eirene turned her back on him. One of the brigands seized Zoe by the arm, and Wylie grew desperate.

"For the last time, turn out your pockets!" he said low and fiercely to Eirene. "If you don't, I swear to you, on my word and honour, I'll get my hands loosed and do it myself."

Eirene was cowed. A muttered "Your honour!" passed her lips, but, slowly and reluctantly she extracted from all the many pockets with which the Vindobona tailor had provided her such spoils as struck the brigands dumb with awe and astonishment, while Zoe looked on stupefied. Nearly all the jewellery Eirene had exhibited in the train seemed to be secreted about her person—pearls, rubies, emeralds, everything except the quaint enamelled plaques which she had said she prized most of all. There could be

no doubt that before parting with her jewel-case she had removed all its most valuable contents.

"Is that all?" asked Wylie sternly, and she drew a bracelet from under her sleeve, and hurled it passionately on the heap at her feet.

"That is everything," she said defiantly. "And I wish you and your friends joy of it. Of course I knew from the first that you were in league with them."

"Now it is your turn," said Wylie to Zoe, and she added to the heap a collection which filled the brigands with indignation, noticing as she did so that Eirene's bracelet bore an eagle upon it—a design which seemed in some way familiar. A shabby purse moderately filled, two note-books, one very small, and the other large enough to require a special pocket for its accommodation, and a serviceable pencil-case—these were all that the robbers cared to appropriate of her possessions, but Maurice and Wylie were despoiled of everything their pockets contained.

CHAPTER VII.

A NIGHT'S LODGING.

FOR a minute or two the captives were left standing together while the brigands divided the spoil, each man stowing his share away in the bag slung knapsack-wise over his shoulder, and Wylie said hastily to Zoe, "You had better pick up what you can of the things they have left. Of course we shall be rescued to-morrow, but you will be more comfortable to-night."

Obediently Zoe gathered together various odds and ends of clothing, one or two of Eirene's hair-brushes, deprived of their silver backs, and such other trifles as the cupidity or ingenuity of the brigands saw no use for. Her note-books and writing materials, the contents of her travelling workbox, and the little "first-aid" case on which she prided herself, had all been seized upon as valuable spoils, and she found herself as destitute as the most heedless traveller could deserve to be. Eirene, brooding sullenly over her wrongs, gave her no help in her search, and she rolled up the poor remains of their joint possessions into a bundle and tied it round with a broken umbrella-strap. This was only done just in time, for the brigands, their delightful task accomplished with a good deal of squabbling and murmuring against the decisions of the chief, had leisure to think of their

prisoners. Accompanied by two others leading the horses which had been taken from the carriage, the interpreter came towards them.

"Behold! we beneficent beings," he observed genially. "We furnish even horses zat ze women may ride."

"I fancied we provided the horses," murmured Maurice, from his seat on the ground.

"I won't ride," said Zoe quickly. "Maurice must. He can't walk."

"Nonsense! I can walk perfectly well," said Maurice.

"For goodness' sake do what they tell you," said Wylie anxiously. "It's only for one night."

"Your eyes most be blinded," pursued the interpreter. Zoe gasped.

"He means blindfolded," explained Maurice, as the man produced the dirtiest handkerchief any of the captives had ever seen.

"Oh no, no!" entreated Zoe, breaking down at last. "Why, they might take us and you in different directions, and we should never know. I'll shut my eyes—anything, but don't let us be blindfolded. Do speak to them," she begged of Wylie. "They listen to you."

"Pull yourself together," he said sternly. "I should never have suspected you of being hysterical." The accusation told, and Zoe, with both hands pressed to her chest, fought down the threatening sobs. Wylie turned to the interpreter. "Look here," he said, "the ladies are frightened. If they think they are to be separated from their brother they will give you a lot of trouble. Why should you blindfold them? If you lead the horses they can't possibly escape."

"I know a treek——" began the interpreter airily, but here his memory failed him; "double valuable to zat

one," he concluded hastily, beckoning to another brigand for the rope twisted round his waist. Cutting off a short length, he fastened one end round Wylie's neck, and made a loop at the other. "Ze lady may hold zat," he said, chuckling.

"All right," said Wylie, checking with a glance a horrified outburst from Zoe. "Quite mediæval, isn't it, Miss Smith—mounted ladies leading captive knights on foot? Lucky for me that I'm not assigned to your sister, or she might avenge her wrongs by strangling me—accidentally, of course."

"Will you endure it?" demanded Eirene fiercely of Maurice, as Zoe, trembling with indignation, submitted to be blindfolded and lifted on one of the horses, with a rug for a saddle.

"What can't be cured must be endured," he responded easily. "What would you suggest I should do?"

"Die!" she hurled at him. "I would, in your place."

"If you really wish that, I can oblige you in a minute or two. You have only to refuse to be blindfolded or to mount your horse. The brigands will naturally proceed to handle you roughly, and I shall feel bound to throw myself forward in your defence. I think I could manage to get killed then. Wylie will be there to look after you and Zoe, and you will be able to think well of me."

"You say that to prevent my offering any resistance!" she said angrily.

"Well, do you wonder that I prefer living to dying?"

"You English have no sense of honour! But I am unjust. You are not noble; why should you prefer death to disgrace?"

At this Maurice laughed, quite unintentionally, disgusting Eirene so much that she submitted as meekly as Zoe had done to be blindfolded and mounted, and slipped the loop of cord over her wrist with a kind of fierce satisfaction. After this humiliation, she thought, even Zoe could no longer pretend that Maurice and Wylie were her equals! The reflection pleased her, and she rode along almost contentedly, reviewing her own past conduct and approving it, which is always a soothing occupation. Maurice, his arm gripped by one of the brigands, who acted both as guide and guard, trudged silently beside her horse, which was led by another of the band. Behind them came Zoe and Wylie, similarly escorted, and the rest of the brigands acted as front and rear guards respectively, their moccasin-clad feet making no sound on the stony soil. The chief had commanded perfect silence, and the horses' feet were muffled.

Zoe's heart was full to bursting. The humiliations inflicted on her brother and Wylie touched her to the quick, and she experienced on their behalf all the indignation that they pretended not to feel. Most incongruously, the thought of the utter absurdity of the position afflicted her at times with an agony of mirth, and moment by moment she was forced to choke down the inclination to scream or to break into wild laughter. The occasional touch of Wylie's shoulder against her knee as he stumbled over the rough ground comforted and calmed her, bringing a sense of the known and the ordinary into the fantastic circumstances of the present. Once or twice she put out a timid hand to make sure that he was still there, receiving a muttered word of encouragement in answer, and the friendly contact enabled her to repress the hysterical outburst she dreaded.

The journey seemed already to have lasted for hours when, after descending a very steep hill, the interpreter announced that there was a "reever" in front, and that Maurice and Wylie must submit to be carried across. With one voice they assured him that they would prefer to wade, but he explained that the chief's solicitude for their health was so great that he would not hear of their running the risk of catching cold. Zoe laughed involuntarily on hearing this, and thus relieved her feelings a little, though horribly ashamed of her lack of sympathy. The brigands must either be adepts in the art of torture by pin-pricks, or totally destitute of a sense of humour. Maurice muttered that he did not see the joke, as he was carried off by two stalwart ruffians down a sloping bank, across, and up again, but Wylie manufactured a creditable response to her laugh. "A Gilbert and Sullivan melodrama, isn't it?" he said, as he also was safely conveyed across the twenty feet or so of what must be presumed to be a rushing torrent, from the way in which the bearers slipped and tumbled about. The horses crossed with surprising steadiness, and the journey was resumed, the track now trending generally up instead of down. Zoe had lost all inclination to laugh by this time. She was cold and tired, and stiff and miserable, and full of terrible apprehensions. If Wylie had not been close at hand she would have defied the opinion of the brigands and cried like a baby, but she could not break down in his presence. He expected her to be brave, and she tried to forget her aching limbs and think only of the literary use to which she could put this disagreeable experience in the future. This was the way in which she usually comforted herself in her troubles, but it did not seem quite adequate now, and a weary sigh broke from her.

The mere physical feat of sitting her horse without pommel or stirrup seemed no longer possible. If only she could slide to the ground and sleep!

"Keep up!" murmured Wylie. "Milosch—that's the interpreter chap—says it's only a little farther."

Once more she pulled herself together and replied cheerfully, and before long the necessity for endurance ceased. A subtle change in the muffled sounds surrounding her showed her that the horse was being led into a building of some sort, and when he stopped she slid off helplessly, much to the amusement of the brigands. Amid their laughter, Milosch took the handkerchief from her eyes, and as soon as she could distinguish her surroundings she found that she was crouching close to a recently kindled fire in a low shed built of rough stones. There was a square hole in the roof, approached by a ladder, and the intense blackness above seemed to show that there was a second storey of some sort. Eirene, Maurice, and Wylie were standing near her, blinking in the firelight, and the brigands were arranging their cloaks on the ground, or rummaging in their bags.

"Ascend up!" commanded Milosch, seizing Maurice by the arm and pointing to the ladder. "We are charitable, we give you food when you deposited safe in supernal regions."

"He can't climb that ladder with his hands tied!" cried Zoe indignantly. "Why don't you untie him?"

Milosch looked doubtfully at the chief, who shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, and the cords were removed, care being taken not to cut them. "We tie you again morning," observed the interpreter, with his cheerful smile. Maurice mounted the ladder, the girls followed, and Wylie, who had lingered to secure the rugs which had served as saddles, and request the

loan of two of the brigands' large overcoats, brought up the rear.

"It's nothing but a hay-loft!" cried Zoe in horrified accents.

"Excuse me," said Wylie; "it is a loft with hay in it, which is a much better thing, since it provides us all with beds. You'll see, Miss Smith. While we are waiting until our friends below send us up some supper, we will curtain off the space at the end for you and your sister. Smith and I will keep close to the hole, so that if the brigands are up to any mischief in the night, they must wake us before they can get near you."

His tone was so cheerful and matter-of-fact that Zoe forgot her fatigue and her fears, and held the rug for him while he tied one corner by its fringe to a jagged nail he had discovered in the sloping roof. The other side of the improvised curtain presented some difficulty, for there was nothing to which to fasten it, until she produced a stout hat-pin, which Wylie hammered into a crevice with the heel of his boot. Eirene disapproved of this use of the hat-pin.

"You should keep it for a better purpose," she said. "Mine I regard as a dagger."

"Do you mean to say that was all you had in your hand this afternoon?" cried Zoe.

"Why not? I would have used it, as I said, and it would kill if one struck hard enough."

"I only wish I had known!" murmured Wylie, with heartfelt earnestness. "There, Miss Smith! now your room is ready, you see. You can make capital nests in the hay, and here are these two greatcoats to cover you. It won't be luxurious, of course, but it's only for one——" He broke off suddenly, and changed the subject. "Smith and I have this other

rug, so we shall do well. We shall all sleep without rocking to-night, I think."

"But can't we manage to escape while the brigands are asleep?" said Maurice, lowering his voice.

"Scarcely, since they are safe to take away the ladder, and it wouldn't do much good to drop down in the middle of them. The fire's there, you know."

"If we were in a Henty book," said Zoe thoughtfully, "we should cut a hole through the roof and let ourselves down outside."

"Unfortunately they have sentries all round," said Wylie. "I heard the chief placing them. The only chance would be to bribe one, and we have nothing to do it with."

Eirene laughed. "If you had not robbed me of my jewels this afternoon, we should not have been destitute," she remarked, as if to explain her mirth.

"I shall begin to wish I had left you to be searched in Balkan fashion," muttered Wylie.

"Now look here, Eirene," said Maurice, in his most elder-brotherly tone, "just drop it. If you are our sister, you must put up with things, and not make yourself unpleasant to our friends. You were frightfully silly this afternoon, and might have risked all our lives, and you ought to thank Wylie for what he did. We are all in one boat, and it's simply idiotic to keep up grudges in this way. Wylie is an old campaigner, and Zoe and I are quite content to put ourselves under his orders. You must do the same, content or not."

He expected a fierce protest from Eirene, but the authoritative tone seemed to cow her. "You don't understand what my jewels were to me," she pleaded. "They were my whole fortune, and the pledge of my birthright, and now I have lost them. But do not

fear. You shall all experience my gratitude in the future, and I shall bear no malice against Captain Wylie for his excess of zeal."

"Much obliged, I'm sure," grunted Wylie, looking as if he thought Eirene a little mad, and Zoe hastened to cover the indiscretion by remarking—

"When you talk in that way, Eirene, you always make me think of Miss Flite promising to 'confer estates.' Don't you think it's horribly unfair, Captain Wylie, that she should be able to patronise Maurice and me in this way?"

Wylie's reply was fortunately anticipated by the arrival of Milosch, who came up the ladder bearing a small collection of lumps of black bread and very ancient cheese, and a skin bottle of water.

"Are we not beneficients?" he asked proudly, depositing his burden on the rug. "We give you our own food!"

"That's all very well," said Maurice, peering down after him as he descended. "They are eating the white bread and things we left in the luncheon-basket."

"How can we eat such stuff as this?" asked Zoe in dismay, for bread and cheese were alike as hard as a rock.

"Ask them to send up a little white bread for the ladies," suggested Wylie; and Maurice, who was sitting nearest the hole in the floor, obeyed, only to receive the answer, "You are our guests. We give you our own food."

Prudently refraining from increasing the girls' aversion for the food by mentioning that he had seen it collected from the sacks of the different brigands, where it had reposed in close contact with wax, tobacco, thread and leather for soling moccasins, rag

for cleaning guns, and other useful articles, Maurice broke off a piece of the bread by knocking it against the roof, and tasting it, pronounced it not so bad when you were hungry. Eirene confessed to having tasted black bread before, when paying visits to peasants' huts, but added contemptuously that she had never expected to find it actually set before her for a meal. However, since there was nothing else, they all managed to nibble a little, and then the girls, almost asleep already, retired behind their curtain, and were soon slumbering peacefully, undisturbed by the loud snores from below, which showed that however guilty the collective conscience of the brigands might be, it did not keep them awake.

It seemed to Zoe and Eirene that they had scarcely slept at all when they heard Maurice's voice warning them that it was time to get up, and they looked at one another in dismay by the light which poured through the holes in the roof, realising that their faces were haggard and their hair full of hay.

"I suppose we can do our hair without a looking-glass," said Zoe. "But do you think there is any hot water?"

The question sounded so absurdly incongruous that she was not surprised to hear it answered by a laugh from Maurice on the other side of the curtain. "There is a stream," he said, "and you have leave to wash your faces and hands. You're lucky to have kept your tooth-brushes, for Wylie and I have to use twigs, like the mild Hindu."

"I shouldn't have thought the brigands would care for tooth-brushes," said Zoe.

"They don't—for their teeth; they use them for cleaning their guns—I've seen them. So be thankful, and don't shirk the cold water. I can even supply you

with soap, for Milosch has just lent me a piece of our own, with strict injunctions to return it, and much self-congratulation on his generosity."

"I think the estimable Milosch is becoming rather a bore," said Zoe viciously, trying to shake the hay off her skirt. "Don't go down until I have bandaged your head again, Maurice. I want to do it properly by daylight."

"Considering the want of water and light up here, wouldn't it be as well to do it downstairs?" suggested Maurice; and Zoe, agreeing, presently found herself and her patient the centre of interest to the brigands. This publicity had its advantages in that she quickly distinguished the man to whom her first-aid case had fallen, and with some difficulty obtained through Milosch its temporary restoration. While the interpreter strutted about, proclaiming loudly to the prisoners the magnanimity of their captors in thus providing them with surgical treatment, she cut away the hair round the cut, joined the edges with strips of plaster, and crowned Maurice with a turban of bandages, to the intense admiration of the spectators. As soon as she had finished, they hustled forward one of their number, who had received a somewhat similar wound in Haji Ahmad's last desperate fight, and informed her, through Milosch, that he also required medical attendance.

"Don't touch the dirty brute," said Wylie. "I'll tie him up roughly—quite good enough for him. He's not fit for you to handle."

"Oh no, I'll do it," said Zoe reluctantly, for the aspect of the wounded man was not alluring. "I never realised before 'how very hard it is to be a Christian,'" she said, rather faintly, when the task

was over, and one of the men filled the rough leathern bucket with fresh water that she might wash her hands.

"I don't think practical Christianity need go quite so far," said Wylie savagely, but the chief was calling to Zoe.

"Stoyan ze Voivoda say, 'Here, girl!'" explained Milosch, and Zoe hesitated. The chief held out a piece of her own chocolate, with an attempt at a smile, and after a struggle with herself, she advanced and accepted it. It was better than the black bread and hard cheese.

"Lo, ze munificence of our autocrat!" exclaimed Milosch, striking an attitude of reverential admiration. "He provide his guests with sweetmeats!"

"Oh, stow that, Milosch!" entreated Maurice; "it's getting stale. Considering that the things are our own, it would be in better taste to say nothing about them."

Milosch smiled uncomfortably, and joined Stoyan for a murmured confabulation, returning quickly to the prisoners, who were mitigating their hard fare with minute fragments of the chocolate.

"Ze Voivoda say he not tie your hands to-day if you plight your gentlemanly faith to try not to escape," he said to Maurice and Wylie. "We going into mountains, where ze women most walk, and sey need your help."

"To try not to escape?" said Zoe. "Oh, he means not to try to escape. You can promise that, can't you?"

"No, no," said Eirene eagerly. "It is a deception, a snare—I am sure of it. Doubtless the way is easy, and lies through villages, where it would cause

suspicion if you were seen to be fettered, and the brigands think they will make us appear as tourists guided by them. Surely you won't cripple yourselves by such a promise?"

"It does seem rather insane," agreed Maurice. "What do you say, Wylie? We should feel pretty small if we found we had debarred ourselves from accepting a good chance of escape."

"I confess I don't quite see how we are to escape with two ladies through a country which we don't know and the brigands do," said Wylie. "Even Miss Smith's Henty heroes would have found it a large order. But don't think I want to back out of any unpleasantness that's going."

"Well, let us split the difference," said Maurice, "and refuse to give our parole until we see the sort of way they take us. If it is very bad for the girls, we can still ask to be undone."

"You fools one and ozer," remarked Milosch sardonically, when he heard their decision. "Behold our slighted consideration avenge itself in severity."

The meaning of this cryptic sentence appeared immediately, for the brigands, offended by the rejection of their offer, bound the two men's arms behind them so tightly that the cords cut into the flesh. Wylie laughed grimly. "We can't choose to be bound, and then complain because they bind us," he said. "I am sorry to be unkind, Miss Smith, but the sooner you find the track too difficult for you, the better we shall be pleased."

Even now there was some time to wait before the start, while two men, detailed for the purpose, removed the ashes of the fire and other traces of the night's occupation from the cattle-shed where it had been

spent, and the rest of the brigands made up their loads, those who carried the rugs complaining angrily because the prisoners were obviously unable to do so. Then the procession set out, with the captives in the middle, the girls uneasily silent, frightened by the unpleasant result of Eirene's advice.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HISTORY OF A DAY.

EIRENE's ingenious idea had been signally mistaken. This was evident almost as soon as the little clearing in which the cattle-shed stood had been left behind, and, indeed, it could never have been entertained if the prisoners had been able to see their way and the nature of their surroundings the night before. Far from being an easy road, leading through villages, the path was a mere goat-track, plunging into the very heart of the mountains. To the active brigands, in their flexible moccasins, it presented no particular difficulty, but it was full of perils and alarms for inexperienced climbers wearing boots. At first, Zoe and Eirene shrank nervously from the gaps in the pathway, and the narrow ledges on which they were expected to creep round corners of rock; but the curses and threats which followed the slightest hesitation soon drove them on in blind terror. The brigands were worse than the mountain. Realising that Maurice and Wylie were helpless, the girls maintained sufficient resolution not to appeal to them, even by a glance, as they stumbled painfully up the track, their arms tortured by the cords. Not only curses, but blows, were showered on them whenever they missed their footing; but the treatment meted out to the girls

was what they found hardest to bear. At last, when Zoe slipped and almost fell, and the nearest brigand's grimy paw clutched her and shook her savagely, Wylie could stand it no longer.

"Smith, we must give our parole!" he called to Maurice. "Your sisters can't get on alone. Here, you interpreter, tell them we'll promise not to try to escape."

A halt was called, and a good deal of discussion ensued among the brigands. There was an evident disposition to allow Maurice and Wylie to bear the consequences of their refusal to the bitter end, but the men who were carrying the rugs objected, and so did the two who were charged with seeing to the girls' safety. It was unreasonable, they pointed out with much cogency, to expect them to be bothered with these troublesome women and their parcels, when the task could be imposed upon their natural protectors, and the plea commended itself at length to the rest. While Milosch delivered an oration on the unsurpassed kindness of the brigands in allowing the captives to change their minds, the chief cut the cords with his knife, and ordered an immediate advance. Chafing his numbed wrists, Wylie joined Zoe.

"We may have prevented you from escaping!" she said miserably.

"Not a bit of it. At least, if you see any chance of escape here in these atrocious hills, I must say I don't. Take my arm, won't you? the path is wider just here. Oh, I say"—he had caught sight of tears in her eyes—"please don't! You're not fagged out yet?"

"It's—not that," came in a series of gasps. "It's seeing you—and Maurice—knocked about—and not

being—able to do—anything. I hate—being a woman."

"It's all in the day's work," with discreet evasiveness. "Come, now, make up your mind you're campaigning—'climbing the Afghan mountain-track,' you know."

"Is the Khoord-Cabul disaster?" with the ghost of a smile.

"What a cheerful mind you have! But after all, the captives were rescued that time, so it's a good omen. There! that's right," as Zoe stumbled and saved herself by catching at him. "Don't make us feel that our tremendous sacrifice was in vain. I'm afraid your sister hasn't forgiven me yet. She refused my help so decidedly just now that I had no choice but to leave her to your brother."

"She has rather strained ideas of honour," said Zoe hesitatingly, "and I think she imagines you lead Maurice wrong. You see, it was you who offered to give the parole, and I suppose that sends you down in her estimation."

"Well, it's a good fault, at any rate—too keen a sense of honour. We English are too ready, no doubt, to think that because a thing is a compromise it must be right. Your sister will be a fine woman when her angles are a little rubbed off, if she sticks to her creed."

"But she doesn't stick to it in little things!" broke out Zoe involuntarily. "Oh, I oughtn't to have said that!" she cried in distress, realising how her speech must sound from Wylie's standpoint. "We have been brought up so differently, you know; she is always surprising us."

"It was rather an experiment bringing her on a trip of this kind, wasn't it? Take my hand across here. I mean, some people are all right as long as everything

goes well, and they have all their own things about them; but trouble or strangeness of any kind seems to bring all their rough edges to light. Of course, she only wants to knock about a bit—that'll make all the difference," he added hastily.

"I—I can't explain all the circumstances," said Zoe, in some confusion, "but it seemed the only thing we could do, to have her with us. And she really means to be sisterly, I am sure. It's only that she doesn't quite understand things. And we must all sink or swim together, of course."

"Quite so; and I hope I may be considered a brother in that particular sense. You wouldn't all make your escape, and leave me in the hands of these fellows, would you?"

"Do you think it likely?" asked Zoe indignantly. "And I don't think we should have much chance of escaping without you, either. Oh," lowering her voice, "do tell me why you suddenly changed your mind about our being rescued? At first, you said over and over again that we should only be prisoners for one night, but when we got to the shed yesterday evening you stopped in the middle of a sentence and seemed to remember something, and since then you have made no more prophecies."

"It wasn't that I remembered something, but that I realised something," said Wylie, shifting the rugs he was carrying from his arm to his shoulder, and speaking under their shelter. "When I expected to be rescued to-day, I thought we should still be inside the triangle formed by the road, the railway, and the river, in which we were captured. When we did not arrive last night, the people across the river would inquire by telegraph whether we had started, and it would be seen at once that something had happened to us on the

road. There are enough soldiers and gendarmes within easy reach to sweep the triangle thoroughly from the road and railway to the river, and we were bound to be discovered."

"And it was after we crossed the river that you saw we were no longer inside the triangle? But I thought the country to the south was much more settled. Would the brigands really take us there?"

"Ah, that's their artfulness. Did you truly think it was the river we crossed last night—only twenty feet wide, and shallow enough to wade through?"

"But what else could it have been—just a stream? Then we should still be inside the triangle."

"It was not water at all; it was the railway."

"Oh!" said Zoe blankly. "How could you tell?" she added.

"Didn't you notice that there was no sound of water? One would have expected a good deal of noise from the way in which the brigands pretended to stumble about, as if the current was a swift and broken one. That struck me at once, and I listened hard. If the men carrying me had been wearing boots, I should have heard them crunching on the ballast, or knocking against the rails, but of course their mocasins made no noise. But I noticed that they lifted their feet to avoid something four times, and by calculating the length of their steps I found it was just where the rails would naturally come. Then I was sure."

"Then it's no good our hoping to be rescued soon?"

"We won't give up hope, certainly. But it's a stern chase now—no chance of our being surrounded. And this is the brigands' own country, where the Grand Seignior's writ can hardly be said to run."

"Then it may be days—or weeks—or months?" breathed Zoe faintly. "How can we stand it?"

"Only a day at a time, at any rate, and any day may be the last. Think you are on the North-West Frontier, as that appeals to you so much. I'll fight my battles, or rather scrambles, o'er again for your benefit. Do you mind telling me why it should be more comforting to be climbing, under equally unpleasant conditions, in the Suleiman Koh than in the Balkans?"

"I don't know; it's just the feeling," said Zoe. "Oh!" stepping on a rolling stone and clutching at him wildly. "Oh, what shall we do? Look at that place in front!"

"It's a bad bit," said Wylie judicially. "I shall want both my hands free." He was twisting the rugs rapidly into a long roll, which he passed over one of his shoulders and under the other arm. "Now if you could lend me the hat-pin I honourably restored to you this morning, I shall have nothing to think of but getting you across. Your brother has done some climbing, hasn't he? Otherwise I had better take you over first, and come back for your sister."

Zoe's lips moved, but no sound came from them as she returned him the hat-pin, a good deal bent by its use as a peg, and he fastened the ends of the rugs across his chest. "Now, don't be frightened," he said cheerfully. "We'll get you across all right. You may be quite sure you are much too valuable to the brigands for them to let you get killed here. Here's your own particular pet ruffian coming to our help. What a blessing it isn't Milosch! He would stop in the middle of the most awful places to gas about his self-sacrifice in lending his aid. And Zeko has a rope, too. This is first-class."

Zeko, the brigand whose head Zoe had bound up, made signs as he came that Wylie and he would fasten the ends of the rope round their own waists, and take Zoe between them; and thus they started on their perilous journey. For a hundred yards or so the path was non-existent, the bare rock running sheer down with only a very slight slope. Happily, the stone was soft enough to allow the cutting of holes for feet and hands, but the brigands had not considered the comfort of ladies in preparing these. It was almost impossible for Zoe to support both feet or both hands at the same time, and she spent some of the most frightful moments in her life in standing with one foot wedged into a crevice while Zeko, hanging in some miraculous way below her in front, guided the other to the next foothold, and Wylie, gripping the rock firmly with one hand, held out the other that she might cling to it as she swung herself on. The brigands in front were sitting down to watch and criticise the performance, and those behind were quarrelling who should pilot Maurice and Eirene; for Zeko had refused contemptuously to trouble himself about them. A man was impressed into the service at last, and Zoe, now safely on the path again, but sick and faint after her terrible experience, hid her eyes that she might not see the transit. It seemed impossible that Maurice could accomplish it successfully, for, in addition to the difficulties Wylie had surmounted, he had the brigand rearguard pressing on his heels, cursing him for not quitting each foothold quicker, and even striking his hands with their sticks to make him loose his hold of the rock. He paid no attention to them, and would not allow Eirene to hurry, as she was inclined to try to do, finally bringing her safely across.

"I couldn't have done it," whispered Wylie to

Zoe, and she welcomed the tribute to Maurice gratefully.

This was the worst experience in the day's journey, but the track still wound round projecting rocks, above precipices, and up torrent-beds. The girls were utterly exhausted before the end was reached, and Maurice and Wylie could only drag them ruthlessly on, scolding, encouraging, even threatening, though not with the cold-blooded realism of the brigands, whose untranslated menaces betrayed an ingenuity springing from long practice in torture. At last a thick patch of wood in a sheltered cleft on the mountain-side was pointed out as the halting-place for the night, and two of the brigands, who had gone on in advance some time before, rejoined the rest with a couple of goats, which they mentioned casually that they had requisitioned from a goatherd who was so unfortunate as to pasture his flock in the neighbourhood. Instantly the wood became a scene of pleasant bustle. Some of the band cleared a space for a camp, others began to prepare huge fires where the trees would prevent the lights being seen from the valley below, and the rest devoted themselves to culinary operations of a brief and sketchy character.

The prisoners were left to themselves, in the comfortable security that they could not possibly run away, however much they might wish it. The girls sat obediently where they had been placed, leaning against a tree, and went to sleep forthwith, while Maurice and Wylie, with a knife borrowed from Zeko, cut down branches and bushes and built a hut for them—an attention which it had not occurred to the brigands to offer. The hut was just large enough to hold the two comfortably. Its floor was of pine-boughs covered with a rug, and it had a kind of screen

of twisted branches for a door. In front of it the captives were allowed to kindle a small fire of their own, and at this Wylie began to cook their supper. Milosch, with much ostentation, had brought them a piece of goat's-flesh as a proof of Stoyan's solicitude for their welfare, and Wylie cut this up into kabobs, which he toasted on improvised wooden skewers. The smell was so savoury that it penetrated the girls' slumbers and woke them, and they sat up and displayed an intelligent interest in Wylie's proceedings as they waited till the meat was ready. Never had they tasted anything so delicious in their lives, they declared, as the scorched morsels of meat, eaten as fast as they were ready, without plates or knives and forks, from the skewers on which they were cooked. Zoe even began to moralise on the readiness of civilised humanity to revert to savagery, which was a proof, as Maurice said, that she was getting over her fatigue already. After the meal the girls refused to go to bed at once, declaring that they wanted to enjoy the sensation of resting instead of losing it in sleep, and the faithful Zeko brought them an offering of four cigarettes to round off the entertainment. Zoe felt obliged to light hers and pretend to smoke it, though she dropped it into the fire as soon as Zeko's back was turned, but Eirene smoked as calmly and with as much enjoyment as the men. The cigarettes, though treated with the utmost tenderness, were soon finished, and Maurice and Wylie stretched themselves luxuriously upon the carpet of pine-needles which covered the ground, to enjoy a well-earned rest after their labours.

"If I may offer a piece of practical advice," said Wylie to the girls, "it is that you should take off your boots, and rest your feet as much as possible."

"It's quite clear that you have been here before, so to speak," said Zoe, as she prepared to comply. "When the commanding officer advises just what one was longing to do, it's delightful to obey."

"Oh, don't!" cried Eirene, with an ostentatious groan, as she pulled off a sadly disfigured little shoe. "I have heard you talking in that way for hours—pretending, always pretending. 'These are the Shinwari Hills, all brown and burnt and bare. Below in the valley is the tower of a Waziri chief. There is an Afridi force waiting for us round the next corner. We are carrying rifles and rations and water-bottles and all sorts of utterly useless things——'"

"I appeal to you," protested Wylie to Zoe; "did I really talk such piffle as all that? If I did, our misfortunes must have turned my brain."

"Oh, you didn't say exactly those things," said Eirene—"though I heard the names so often that I know they are right—but it was always that sort of thing, pretending that there was eternal snow on one side and a precipice a mile deep on the other, instead of disagreeable rough hills, covered with ugly trees, which are always either tripping you up with their roots, or knocking off your hat with their branches. In a day or two I shall have to wear a handkerchief on my head like a peasant woman," and she contemplated ruefully the remains of her hat, which had started in life as a smart straw, with a peculiarly deceptive and Parisian air of simplicity about it. "And instead of noble, chivalrous Orientals"—a protest from Wylie—"with snow-white robes and splendid turbans, we have these detestable rogues who call themselves Christians, with kilts black with dirt, and no more feeling than a stone. What is the use of pretending about it?"

"It seems to have called up heroic and romantic visions in your mind, at any rate," said Zoe, "and that ought to have lightened the tedium of the march."

"And, anyhow, I didn't inflict it on you," said Maurice.

"Indeed you did not. You were too cross or too miserable—I don't know which—to talk, so that I heard the others the whole time."

"Awfully sorry to have bored you," said Wylie. "You see, I thought it might help your sister along if I drew on my recollections of old days."

"It did," cried Zoe. "I don't believe I could have kept up without it. Why did you listen, if you were bored, Eirene?"

"It wasn't that exactly," explained Eirene; "but it seemed so silly. We are not children; what good can it do to pretend?"

"If it helps us to bear things more cheerfully, surely that's some good?" suggested Zoe.

"But what is the use of pretending to be cheerful? All the first part of the day, before I was too tired myself to care to listen, I used to hear Captain Wylie say to you, 'Awfly fagged?' and you conjured up a sprightly voice, and said, 'Oh dear, no—hardly at all.' It wasn't true, and he knew it. What good did it do to pretend?"

"It was true," said Zoe stoutly. "The mere fact of being asked the question made one feel less tired for the moment. And you do say the horriest things, Eirene."

"She is like the old woman whose clergyman remonstrated with her for bearing her troubles so badly," said Maurice. "The old lady told him that when chastening was sent us, it meant that we should be chastened, and she wasn't going to pretend not to be."

"Well," said Wylie, rather tartly, "it has grown to be a sort of tradition, I suppose, among English people that each should keep up for the sake of the rest, and all I can say is that I hope it'll go on. I don't see the use of asking questions and speculating about it."

"I am inquiring into national character," said Eirene, undaunted. "The people I know, when they are asked if they are in trouble, acknowledge it at once, and point out what a dreadful trouble it is, and how no one was ever quite so sorely tried before——"

"And turn it round and inside out, and hold it up to catch the light," put in Zoe.

"But if you ask an Englishman, he looks down at you as if he was a mile high, and says with an icy smile, 'Not at all. Rather enjoy it than otherwise!'" with a very fair imitation of Wylie's displeased manner.

"How awfully smart you are this evening, Eirene!" drawled Maurice. "Hairbreadth escapes seem to sharpen your wits. But I think it's about time all good little girls were in bed."

"I could talk all night when I am interested," persisted Eirene.

"I haven't the very faintest, slightest shadow of doubt of it. But Zoe is half-asleep, and Wylie is nodding, and my eyes would shut of themselves if they were not fixed on your speaking countenance. Hullo, what's up?"

There was a commotion among the brigands feasting round the other fire, caused by the sudden arrival of a man, who was gesticulating violently towards the direction from which they had come. By the firelight the prisoners recognised him as their treacherous driver of the day before.

"Is it help? Are we going to be rescued?" cried Zoe eagerly.

"No such luck; I wish it were," said Wylie, who had caught some of the newcomer's words. "Never mind about me," he went on, rising, "just go to bed. I want to hear what this chap has to say."

He went towards the other fire, and to the horror of the three left behind, the brigands sprang at him like one man, with howls of fury. Curses and execrations were poured on him, he was hustled and dragged hither and thither, and angry men threatened him with pistols and drawn daggers.

"What can it be?" murmured Zoe, with white lips.

"I don't know. Keep quiet," said Maurice, buttoning his coat and squaring his fists. For the girls' sake he would keep out of it as long as he could, but if Wylie was struck he must go in and back him up, little as two unarmed men could hope to do against a crowd with knives. To his relief, order was presently restored by the intervention of the chief, after which Milosch made a long and evidently moving oration, and Wylie returned to his friends, scowls and murmurs of hatred following him.

"Oh, what was it?" cried Zoe as he reached them.

"Nothing; merely the penalty for playing the fool," he replied. "You know how long they kept us standing about with our hands tied before we started this morning? I was standing rather by myself, and the ground was sandy, so the bright idea seized me of leaving our rescuers a clue to the way we were going. With my boot I drew 'N.W.' fairly deep in the sand, shuffling about as if I was tired of standing so long. Unfortunately, the gentleman who has just arrived reached the place before the rescuers, and twigged what the letters meant. This diffusion of Western learning in the East is a nuisance. Hence all the fuss. Milosch was particularly severe on my ingrati-

tude in trying to betray the brigands after all they had done for us, and I had to remind them of the way in which we were tied at that very moment. So they calmed down, as you see."

"I should have done it if I had thought about it," confessed Maurice. "And yet—these chaps can make things so beastly uncomfortable for the girls, you know."

"Oh, Maurice, don't be so ungrateful!" cried Zoe. "If it had succeeded, we should all be saying what a splendid idea it was, and how clever Captain Wylie was to think of it. And, at any rate, it's over now."

"Is it over?" asked Eirene. Wylie hesitated.

"Well," he said, "I believe they are taking the night to think about it. But, after all, what can they do? It wouldn't be to their interest to treat any of us badly, you know. They might refuse to accept my parole and tie my hands again, but they haven't, so far. So let us be cheerful."

CHAPTER IX.

ONE TOO MANY.

"OH, I say! It can't be time to get up yet," groaned Maurice, rolling over resentfully on his couch of pine-needles as a hand was laid on his shoulder. But the hand shook him slightly, and Wylie's voice said, "Wake up, and don't make a row."

Throwing off the rug, Maurice sat up, blinking in the grey light of dawn. He and Wylie had chosen their sleeping-places in front of the hut, so that the girls might know they were at hand in case of an alarm in the night; but Wylie was now beckoning him away from it. On the other side of the ashes where the fire had been stood the brigands in a row, grim and silent, with their rifles ready. Maurice stared.

"What's up?" he asked in bewilderment.

"We desire not so moch to guard," responded Milosch. "You too many for us. Ze women are precious, and zere most be one man for to attend upon zem. Ze ozer most go. We make you draw ze lot."

"All right, all right! but you needn't do it where the ladies can hear you," said Wylie impatiently. "Come along, Smith." Wide awake by this time, Maurice rose, and they followed the brigands into

the wood, Wylie grasping Maurice's arm to draw him out of earshot of Milosch. "Look here," he said. "If the lot falls upon you, of course I'll take it, for your sisters can't do without you, but I'm pretty certain it's only a trick to get rid of me. They've been planning this all night."

"But you don't think they'd dare—to *kill* you?"

"Why not? They killed Haji Ahmad without compunction. Their lives are forfeit already, you see, and so long as your sisters are alive, they know that no Government will dare to hunt them down."

"Zese woods of different shortness," said Milosch, advancing with a couple of twigs. "You select each, and we tell you which has drawn ze black ball."

"But which represents the black ball—the long one or the short one?" demanded Maurice.

"Zat not for you to know. We tell you when ze lot is drawn."

"I told you so," murmured Wylie. "Whichever I draw is the fatal one. Here, Milosch, let me choose."

He took one of the twigs, the shorter, and Maurice found himself with the other in his hand. Stoyan, coming forward, measured their length with great deliberation, and announced that the lot had fallen upon Wylie. Maurice sprang forward furiously, but Wylie pinned his arms to his sides.

"Now don't let us give ourselves away," the doomed man entreated. "I know what you feel like, and what you would like to do, but your business just now is to think of your sisters. They must not be left in the hands of these scoundrels without a protector. You'll have to look after them both now. Don't let them know what's happened to me if you can help it. Can't you let them think I have been taken

away to be kept safe somewhere? Remember, they have a lot to bear already."

"I can't stand by and see you murdered," panted Maurice.

"I don't want you to. Go back to the hut. Your sisters will be terrified if they wake and find us both gone. Good-bye, and good luck to you. I wouldn't ask for a better comrade at a pinch than you have been all through this."

"Any messages?" asked Maurice shortly.

"No, I have no one to trouble about me, and my affairs are all in order. Some day you might tell your eldest sister that I was sorry to leave without saying good-bye to her."

"Ze Voivoda say he exhausted of waiting," said Milosch, coming up with a handkerchief, which he proceeded to tie over Wylie's eyes.

"Now go, go!" entreated Wylie of Maurice. "You must think of the girls, as I ought to have done yesterday instead of playing the fool."

Maurice wrung his hand and withdrew, slowly and reluctantly. At the edge of the wood he turned, hearing his friend's voice raised angrily. "For heaven's sake, leave me my hands free!" Wylie cried, but Maurice gathered that the demand was refused. He went on into the clearing, and sat down beside the extinguished fire, a prey to the deepest despondency he had ever known. Without Wylie, how were he and the hapless girls to face the trials before them? He himself might be the next sacrifice to the savagery of the brigands, and what would then become of Zoe and Eirene, since neither fear nor avarice seemed potent to restrain their captors? Wylie's resourcefulness, his restless energy, his cheerfulness, and the underlying force of character which

manifested itself only occasionally, but was therefore all the more telling, had made him a tower of strength, and Maurice felt bitterly his own comparative futility. His life had taught him to exercise a certain amount of initiative, clogged by the habit, inculcated as a duty, of weighing the merits of a question before deciding on it, but while he was thinking, Wylie would act—would have acted, rather. The thought swept over Maurice with desolating effect. The man of action was taken, the man who could only feel sure of himself in the humdrum routine of daily life was left. It did not occur to him that Wylie had not grown to his full mental height in a day, or that he himself might draw from the depths of his present desolation the experience which would complete the measure of his manhood.

"Maurice, how slack you look!" cried Zoe, putting out a dishevelled head gingerly at the door of the hut. "Mind you tell Captain Wylie that he must give us some more kabobs for breakfast."

"All right. They'll be ready. Provided," with a sudden happy inspiration, "that you promise faithfully to eat them before you begin to talk. It's no good my—our cooking if you let the things get cold when they ought to be eaten at once."

"I promise, honour bright!" said Zoe, and Maurice began to collect wood for a fresh fire, half fearing that orders for the march would be issued before he had time to do any cooking. But the brigands came back into camp and sat down round their own fire with the evident intention of taking their ease, and when the girls came out of the hut they found Maurice busy toasting his face as well as a bountiful supply of kabobs.

"Where's Captain Wylie?" they cried.

"What did you promise?" asked Maurice repressively. "Sit down and begin at once, and I'll be doing some more."

"Maurice, you are eating none yourself," cried Zoe, having kept her promise until hunger was satisfied. "And where is Captain Wylie? He didn't get his face nearly as much burnt as you do."

"Oh, I don't know. Somewhere about, I suppose," mumbled Maurice, "Have some more?"

"No, thanks; I don't want any more. Maurice, has anything happened to him? Do you really know where he is?"

"Can't you let the poor chap alone?" demanded Maurice desperately. "He hasn't escaped by himself and left us in the lurch—I can tell you that, at any rate."

"No, but has he been taken away? I believe something has happened. Tell me honestly, Maurice; where is he?"

"They took him away early this morning," admitted Maurice. "He thought himself it was out of spite for his trying to get us rescued. He asked me to say how sorry he was not to bid you good-bye."

"Good-bye? Then he thought—— They weren't going to kill him?"

"How can I tell? They didn't do it when I was there."

"But you think they have done it? And you let them?"

"Look here," said Maurice; "I'd better tell you all I know, and you can see what you think." He told his story as fast as he could, with involuntary pauses here and there.

"Then there can be no doubt," said Zoe slowly at last. "He is dead now."

"I admire you both," said Eirene, with her gracious air of distributing praise impartially. "Your duty was to the living, and he knew it. He could only die, and he did that well. Some day——"

"Eirene," said Zoe, with concentrated bitterness, "if you say you will raise a memorial church in his honour, I shall hate you till I die."

She rose and went into the hut, and Eirene turned to Maurice.

"You think he is dead?" she said.

"Why, of course. What else could I think?"

"I don't believe it in the least. I think they were trying to frighten him—as a punishment for yesterday, you know. I think they will blindfold him and tie his hands and pretend to take him to the edge of a rock and throw him over, but he will only fall one or two feet."

"Good gracious, Eirene! how can you think of such diabolical things?" cried Maurice.

"But it is not as if it would hurt him really. They would wish to see him show fear; that would be most natural. It would be foolish for them to kill him. If they found themselves hotly pressed—do you say?—they might kill one of us as a warning to the pursuers, but to do it without any purpose would only diminish their power of bargaining for a ransom and an amnesty."

"Well, if you're so certain, why don't you tell Zoe?"

Eirene shrugged her shoulders. "She is determined that he is dead; how could my sole opinion change her mind? If I thought it would comfort her I would tell her; but suppose that we see him no more again until we are all ransomed and set free? She would determine again that he was dead, and suffer twice over."

"I only hope you may be right, and that he is alive," said Maurice gloomily.

The brigands had finished their meal, and were peacefully employed in mending their clothes and moc-casins, while the chief was seated under a tree, in close confabulation with Milosch. A sentry was stationed at the head of the track leading to the clearing, there was another on the brow of the mountain above, and a third, as Maurice knew, at the lower end of the wood. Everything seemed to portend a quiet day, without further wandering, and Maurice felt the fact an added trial, welcome though the prospect of rest was. If Wylie was not already dead, where was he, and what fate was intended for him? It was maddening to think of repeating these questions for a whole day, uninterrupted by any possibility of useful occupation.

As Maurice sat engrossed in his dreary meditations, Zoe came out of the hut, red-eyed and gruff-voiced, but overflowing with nervous energy.

"Do let us find something to do, Maurice, if we are to stay here all day," she said. "Let us make a hut for you. I'm sure it will be better for you than sleeping in the open another night."

Maurice rose at once, receiving a wholly unnecessary glance of advice from Eirene, which said, "Humour her; she needs something to divert her mind," and going into the wood, began to choose fresh branches, and cut them down with the useful knife which served so many purposes. Zoe threw herself into the work with determination, and Eirene sat enthroned on a hillock at the foot of a tree and gave counsel.

"Make it large enough for Captain Wylie as well," she said, as Maurice, thinking he had cut enough twigs, was gathering them into a bundle to carry back to the clearing; "he may be back to-night."

"Eirene, how can you?" cried Zoe indignantly, and stopped, unable to say more.

"Look here, Eirene," said Maurice, exasperated, "can't you get something to do? It's all very well to sit there looking on——"

"Oh, she can't," broke in Zoe. "Her arm got strained again in crossing that awful place yesterday, and it was rather bad when I dressed it this morning. Let her alone; I suppose she has her own idea of a joke."

Eirene's glance at Maurice said, "What did I tell you?" as she rose and picked her way daintily back to the clearing. When they returned thither with their burdens, she retired to a rock at some little distance, with an ostentatious air of leaving them to their obstinate ill-humour in peace. Finding that they took no notice of her, however, she came gradually nearer, in order to give them the benefit of her valuable advice, which proved more useful than might have been expected, since, as she said, she had often watched her father's foresters build huts of birch-boughs in her childhood. When she repeated her suggestion that the hut should be made large enough for two, however, Maurice felt obliged to intervene with a pacific compromise.

"We have all day to spend over it," he said, "so we can make a better job of it than the one we ran up in a hurry last night. You girls shall move into it, do you see? and I'll succeed to the old one."

Zoe accepted the suggestion in silence, and they went on with their work, interweaving the slanting branches which formed the sides with smaller boughs and twigs. They worked hard most of the day, and talked so little that Eirene found them very dull company. At last she left them in despair, and wandered up the hill towards the rock where the sentry stood, taking care to keep within sight of the

clearing. They saw her seat herself on a convenient stone and begin to study the landscape, and then they forgot all about her until an exclamation from her, simultaneously with a shout from the sentry, made them start to their feet and the brigands grasp their rifles.

"Can we have been traced after all?" cried Maurice.

"A day too late!" murmured Zoe. "Oh, if they had only come up with us last night!"

"Well, all our work won't be much good, for they'll be sure to hurry us away somewhere else," said Maurice, noticing that the brigands were hastily cramming their possessions into their sacks. But presently another shout from the sentry, following on a faint hail from the distance, announced that only three men were in sight, and they were friends. Almost at the same moment, Eirene came rushing frantically down the hillside.

"It is himself! I told you so!" she cried. "It is Captain Wylie and two of the brigands. I was sure of it. They were only trying to frighten him, and he is coming back."

"Oh, let us go and meet him!" cried Zoe.

"Let Maurice go," said Eirene primly. "Your eyes are so red, Zoe," she added in a low voice.

"Don't be Early-Victorian, Eirene," was the crushing reply. "Do you think I mind his seeing that I cried because I thought he was killed? I should be ashamed if I hadn't!"

They went down the track in the wake of the brigands, who were jostling one another in mingled surprise, irritation, and alarm. The two members of the band who accompanied Wylie began to pour forth explanations and excuses at the top of their voices long before any words could be clearly distinguished,

and while they were seized and cross-examined by their fellows, Wylie was able to reach his friends.

"You haven't quite done with me yet!" he said, giving one hand to Zoe and the other to Maurice, while Eime waited for a more ceremonious greeting. "I shall be able to cook one more supper for you before I am sent off."

"Then it was all a trick?" asked Maurice.

"Well, in a way. You would have been left to think that I was dead, as a warning to you against playing the fool, I suppose, but what I was really picked out for was a very serious matter—getting your ransom. The brutes over-reached themselves utterly in the way they went to work, and the result is that here I am."

"What a lot you must have to tell us!" said Zoe. "Wait till we get to the camp, so that we can listen comfortably."

"Why, you must have spent the day in house-building!" said Wylie, as they reached the clearing.

"That's exactly what we did—to drown our misery," said Maurice. "Now begin. Did they pretend to shoot you, or any vile trick like that?"

"No, only cuffed and hustled me down these goat-tracks for ever so far, which was no joke with my eyes covered and my hands tied. I really do wonder that I'm here to tell the tale, for I did more slipping than walking. At last we seemed to come to a comparatively level place, and they took the handkerchief off my eyes and set me free, and instructed me to make the best of my way back to civilisation and tell your friends to send fifteen thousand pounds by this day month if they wanted to see you again alive."

"Fifteen thousand pounds!" gasped Zoe.

"Yes, it sounds a large order, but that wasn't what stumped me. It was that I really know nothing about

you, except that I gather you have a place in Home-shire. I know that Smith was at Cambridge and won a prize for poetry, but I could hardly go there and open a subscription list, or ask the Dons to mortgage the college revenues for his ransom, could I? It sounds absurd that after all we have gone through together we should know so little about each other, and I couldn't make my guards believe it. They evidently thought that we lived next door to one another at home, or something of that sort, and laboured to explain to me that if there had been only three of us they would have made us write a letter, but as there were four, they sent one of us instead. But at last I managed to make them understand that nothing could induce me to show my face in Therma without proper credentials, and that unless I knew who to apply to, there would be no chance of their getting the money, so they decided to send back here for instructions. But when it came to the point, neither of them would be left alone with me, and as I declined to remain where I was and wait for them, the only thing to do was to bring me back."

"You said you were no longer blindfolded?" said Eirene, for Maurice and Zoe were looking at one another in consternation. "Ah, yes, that is it. The guards were afraid of you—of your eyes. They hate them."

"Horribly bad taste in them," said Wylie lightly. "Why, here's our friend Milosch coming—bringing us something for supper, I see."

A sheep had been procured during the day—by nefarious means, of course—and Milosch brought a portion of its flesh for the captives; but he carried also Zoe's safety inkstand, a leaf torn out of one of her note-books, and a pen of unknown origin.

"You write now, before ze sun falls," he said to Maurice, "a letter signified by all of you. Ze ransom we demand is fifteen sousand Ingliss pounds, to be placed in gold zis day month on a spot zat will be indicated to your messenger. If ze ransom comes not forth, or if deception is adventured, we shall kill you, beginning wiz"—he looked round with a calculating eye upon the three, who all afterwards confessed to feeling cold shivers down their backs, and then laughed—"No, I say not who we begin wiz. Perhaps we let you draw ze lot again. From zis time you hold no communion wiz your messenger but in my presence; zerefore seek not to cook up fraud among yourselves."

Maurice looked at Zoe in despair. How could they let Wylie proceed on his quest in absolute ignorance of their real name? and yet, how could they reveal it in the hearing of Milosch, who possessed the disconcerting faculty of being able to understand English much better than he spoke it? Zoe came to her brother's help.

"Captain Wylie had better go to Professor Panagiotis," she said.

"Professor Panagiotis!" said Eiréne sharply. "What do you know about him?"

"He is the friend we were going to stay with," answered Zoe, in surprise. "Do you know him?"

"He was an acquaintance of my father," said Eirene, with some hesitation. "I don't remember that I have ever seen him."

"Well, if he wouldn't remember you we needn't mention you separately," said Zoe quickly, wondering if Wylie was trying once more, as she herself would have done, to reconcile the relationships of this remarkable family. "If you will just say that we are all here together?" she added to Wylie.

"Yes, I think the letter had better go to the Professor," agreed Maurice, "and then he can post you up, Wylie. There are some things that can't very well be explained here, but that have a tremendous bearing on the case."

The letter was written, duly signed by Maurice Smith, Zoe Smith, and Eirene Smith, and addressed to the Professor at his villa at Kallimeri. Milosch was highly entertained by the idea that the head of the Greek party in Emathia should find himself compelled to finance his Slavic opponents to so large an extent, and shouted the news to the rest of the brigands as a huge joke. They chuckled over it without him, for he did not quit the prisoners again. It was evidently his business to see that no one exchanged a word with Wylie that might cover any suggestion designed to cheat the band of their destined spoil, or lead to their being hunted down, and even when Maurice and Wylie rolled themselves up in their rugs to sleep, he sat between them, revolver in hand.

CHAPTER X.

THE OTHER SIDE.

"GOOD-BYE. I'm awfully sorry to leave you like this," said Wylie to Zoe, as he shook hands with her before his departure, while Milosch, for the twentieth time, read over the letter to make sure there was no deception about it.

"But how much better than the way you left us yesterday!" she said, smiling.

"Oh, I didn't mean that. I meant that I feel I am deserting you personally. You and I have always been comrades, haven't we? And I don't quite see how Smith is to squire two ladies at once along these paths."

"Perhaps we shan't be moved on," suggested Zoe. "I should think this place is as safe and secluded as any they could find."

"I only hope it may be so. Do you know"—he lowered his voice—"I almost think I could find my way up here from the place to which they took me yesterday? They forgot to cover my eyes again, you know. If they take me down the same way to-day, I shall be quite sure of it."

"But what good would that be?"

"Why, you don't imagine I shall be content to leave you in these fellows' hands a whole month? I shall

kick up the biggest row that ever was, and simply force the Government to take action. I have a little account of my own to work off with the brigands, you must remember, and I don't feel like putting fifteen thousand pounds into their pockets."

"But if we are not ransomed they will kill us."

"Not if you are rescued first," said Wylie promptly. "Don't be afraid. You don't think I would let a hair of your head be hurt, do you? But if I can save you three weeks or a fortnight of this sort of thing, and at the same time do the brigands out of their prospective gains, do you honestly expect me to lose the chance?"

He waved his hand to her gaily as he went down the hill-track with his custodians, and Zoe fell into a reverie, from which she roused herself with a vigorous mental shake.

"It's a good thing he's gone," she said to herself. "We have been comrades, as he said, and it has been very nice. In a few days more I shouldn't have been able to do without him, and that is out of the question. I have the world to see and my name to make before I think of anything of that sort. Yes, it is a good thing."

But this decision was no sort of justification for Eirene's taking it upon herself to remark that she was glad Captain Wylie was gone, because he ordered Maurice about. A coolness ensued between the two girls, which lasted until Eirene, who wanted to mend her torn shoe, was obliged to apply to Zoe to obtain a needle and thread from Zeko.

Very early on the morning after Wylie's departure the other prisoners found that the brigands were not quite so simple as he had hoped. They had no intention whatever of remaining at the spot where he had left them until he might choose to return. The clear-

ing and the huts were forsaken before dawn, and another day of painful wandering and climbing by devious tracks followed. Zeko, in a lordly and contemptuous way, hauled Zoe over the worst places, so that Maurice was free to look after Eirene, but both girls were utterly spent before the crowning trial of the march occurred. This was a long stiff climb up the bed of a torrent, which, in spite of the summer weather, had quite enough water in it to make the girls miserably wet, and destroy the last possibility of usefulness in their shoes. They were practically bare-footed when they staggered into the little valley from which the torrent flowed down the hillside, and discovered that they were now so high up in the mountains that cold was to be added to their other discomforts. Even the brigands were stirred to pity by their white faces and chattering teeth, or perhaps they feared lest hardship should release their prisoners before they could be ransomed, for they helped Maurice to collect wood for a good fire, and made the girls sit down close to it to dry their skirts. The chief went so far as to administer a small quantity of a potent, if smoky spirit, which took away their breath and made their eyes water, and he also requisitioned a pair of moccasins for each of them from two members of the band who were unwary or fastidious enough to carry more than was needed for immediate wear. The trees up here were too sparse to allow of building huts, but in the rocks by the side of the stream there were hollows which might almost be called caves, and Maurice swept one of these out with a branch, made a smaller fire in it, and arranged the rugs for beds. He himself was accustomed now to sleeping outside, wrapped in one of the brigands' greatcoats, but although he was allowed to lie near the fire, he never forgot the piercing cold of

that night, while inside the cave the girls lay close together with both the rugs over them, and shivered in spite of all. Their appearance alarmed the brigands in the morning, and greatcoats and leggings, such as the men wore, were allotted to them in addition to the moccasins. Their feet were so badly bruised that they could not walk alone, but they were helped up to a sort of ledge on the sunny side of the gorge, where they were at last able to feel warm again. Needles and thread were lent them to alter the clothes into some approach to fit, and on the return of three of the band from an absence of some duration, the chief presented them with large coarse handkerchiefs to replace their battered hats. Maurice, whose broken head was now sufficiently recovered to dispense with bandages, was invested with a fez, from which Stoyan solemnly removed the tassel with his knife, on the ground that it was unbecoming for a captive to wear a tassel to his fez.

Maurice had not been idle during the day. He had collected all the loose pieces of rock he could find, and built them up into a rough wall, cemented with mud from a spot where the stream formed a marshy pool, to keep the wind from blowing into the cave. The brigands who had brought the handkerchiefs had carried also a large truss of straw, and this was spread thickly on the floor, so that the girls found their second night's quarters far more restful than the first. The exhaustion which was the result of the forced march was also passing away, and on the second day they were able to begin to practice walking in the moccasins, which was an art needing some caution.

A week passed quietly, varied only by the expeditions of the brigands to obtain food and news. They seemed to have a well-organised intelligence system, by means

of which they learned that there was much activity among the Roumi authorities, civil and military, and that soldiers were being sent into the mountains in various directions. The brigands displayed amusement rather than apprehension over this news, and there was no lack of food, which would have argued that the peasants were losing their fear of their unacknowledged masters. The girls spent a good deal of time in patching their tattered garments with pieces of the rough brown stuff some of the brigands wore, and also relieved Maurice of his domestic duties, thus leaving him free to execute wonderful engineering works in connection with the stream, damming it in one place to make a pool where the girls might get water close to their cave, and arranging pieces of rock as steps. The energy of the prisoners astonished their captors, who seemed to think it the height of bliss to lie in the sun, smoking and quarrelling, or playing various rudimentary games of chance, and at first every movement was regarded with suspicion. But by degrees Maurice established with them a feeling almost akin to good fellowship, and would sit among them round the fire, listening to their talk, which he was beginning to understand without the intervention of Milosch. Eirene objected strongly to this habit of his, and, as was her wont, spoke her mind freely on the subject.

"It is so undignified, so contemptible!" she declared angrily. "A man of elevated soul would suffer anything rather than associate on familiar terms with wretches from whom he had received such vile treatment."

"But it's to please myself, not them," said Maurice. "I want to find out why all these strapping fellows have turned brigands—to inquire into their grievances, in fact."

"Grievances! What business have they with grievances?"

"I don't know; but they have got some, unfortunately."

"But what have their grievances to do with you?"

"Why, I am a sufferer by them, so are you. Therefore I naturally feel an interest in getting to know what they are."

"And what are they, Maurice?" asked Zoe. "I thought these men all came from Thracia or Dardania."

"No, they are nearly all Illyrians—the Christian kind, such as it is. They are Emathians born, though they are under foreign direction; there's no doubt of that. And very few of them seem to have become brigands for the fun of the thing. Most of them are pretty sick of the life, but they have made their own villages too hot to hold them."

"But that was their own fault," objected Eirene.

"Partly, but it was other people's fault too. They have failed to pay their taxes in bad years, or have mortgaged their land and been sold up. Some of them have taken to the hills after assaulting tax-collectors, and some on account of blood-feuds. They boast that they only rob the rich, whom they hate most heartily; but I fancy that the poor haven't much choice about keeping them supplied with food and clothes, especially if they are Greek poor."

"Why, Maurice, you are hearing the other side!" cried Zoe.

"What other side?" asked Eirene sharply.

"When we heard Professor Panagiotis talk, Maurice said he should like to hear the other side, and now he is doing it," replied Zoe promptly. Maurice, ab-

sorbed in his subject, might have revealed secrets if she had allowed him to answer.

"Yes, it's just as I thought, there are two very distinct sides to the case," he said thoughtfully. "It's something appalling the way these fellows hate the Orthodox Church and everything connected with it. It seems they have been dragooned into belonging to it for generations, with no alternative but Moham-medanism. The priests don't appear to have been examples to their flocks by any means, but were tremendously keen on their dues, though they could only gabble through services which neither they nor the people understood. All education was in Greek, and the people hadn't even the Bible in their own language, so that the only chance for a man to rise was to turn his back on his own nationality altogether."

"And it was right he should!" cried Eirene, with flashing eyes. "Would you degrade the Holy Scriptures and the sacred liturgies by translating them from the glorious Greek into the uncouth dialects of these barbarians?"

"What a very curious thing!" exclaimed Zoe involuntarily.

"What do you mean?" demanded Eirene.

"Why, it's no use pretending that we don't know you're a Scythian, Eirene, for you've said lots of things that show it. And it's very funny to hear you talking just as Professor Panagiotis did, when Scythia is doing all she can to stir up the barbarians, as you call them, against the Greeks."

"Because I have been brought up in Scythia, must I be insensible to truth and rightness?" cried Eirene. "It surprises me, I confess, to find an Englishman supporting the guileful designs of the Slavs in opposition to the noble cause of heroic and persecuted Greece."

"I'm not supporting Slavs or anybody," said Maurice. "If you are anxious to define my attitude, I am blaming both sides impartially. They have got things into such a muddle that it looks as if the whole structure of society in Emathia would have to be built up again from the foundations. If the taxes were honestly assessed and collected, and the middleman eliminated, it would do a good deal, of course, especially if you could also get rid of the money-lender by a system of agricultural banks. But you would want to establish a system of village responsibility, as they have done in Burmah, before you could begin to stamp out blood-feuds and religious faction-fights. I must ask Wylie how they manage to get a police-force which is not prejudiced on one side or the other. Side by side with that, you would have to be opening up the country with roads and railways, and getting the priests better educated, and books translated, and schools established, and the army thrown open to Christians and popularised, so that brigandage would no longer be——"

"The only career for a young man of spirit," supplied Zoe, as he paused.

"Well," burst forth Eirene, who had been listening in speechless indignation as Maurice elaborated his views on the regeneration of Emathia, "I should like to know what business it is of yours?"

"But why should it affect you?" asked Maurice, warned by an anxious glance from Zoe.

"It is just like you English," continued Eirene, disregarding the question. "You meddle all over the world with countries which do not concern you, while your own usurped India is ground under the iron heel of men like Captain Wylie, of whom the very brigands are afraid!"

"Why, you say that as if it was to Wylie's discredit!" said Maurice. "I should have thought it was a distinct feather in his cap. You don't seem to see that just because we are English, every country that doesn't come up to our own high standard does concern us."

Eirene lifted her head, almost tossed it. "When," she began, then changed the form of her sentence—"If I am ever a ruler, I will allow no English to dictate to me. I shall recognise no grievances. If the people disobey me, I shall stamp them out."

"Making a solitude and calling it peace, indeed!" said Zoe.

"Cheerful country yours will be to live in!" said Maurice. "Are you going to have periodical killings-out, like King Twala? or shall you set half the population to kill the other half, and make the survivors fight among themselves till they are all killed, like the Kilkenny cats? Or is it only the present generation that is to be wiped out, so that you may have the children brought up in the way they should go? A lively time you'll have when the hereditary tendencies begin to come out! Why, they'll all have blood-feuds against you."

"I used the wrong word," said Eirene, with heightened colour. "I meant to say that I would stamp the people down. I will listen to no one who is in revolt; but when all rebellion has been suppressed, I shall see for myself if there are any grievances."

"You'll allow people to complain of them peacefully, then?"

"Certainly not; that is rebellion. But I shall oversee everything myself. Not a peasant shall be prosecuted for non-payment of taxes but the case shall

come before me for revision, and the same in all departments of the state."

"I don't think your magistrates will hold office long," said Maurice.

"Besides," said Zoe, "that's just the system that works so badly with the Roumis, Eirene. The Grand Seignior will insist on managing everything himself, and of course he can't do more than a certain amount, and so business gets into frightful arrears all over the empire."

"I don't care," said Eirene stubbornly. "I shall trust no one; that is the lesson life has taught me. The ruler's eye will be everywhere, the ruler's hand always ready."

"Maternal or elder-sisterly government," muttered Maurice. "Well, Eirene, have it your own way, and go ahead, and Zoe and I will come and preach revolution to your people. What would you do to us?"

"I would have you brought to the palace and treated as my dearest friends and honoured guests," responded Eirene, with a promptitude which seemed to show that she had thought the matter out; "but you would not leave it except to be conducted to the frontier."

"And if we came back?"

"Then I should conclude that you wished to remain with me, and I should assign you permanent quarters in the palace, where I could see that you did no harm."

"Well, we shall know what to do when we feel we can't exist without you any longer," said Zoe lightly. A curious thought, almost a certainty, had occurred to her, and she put a question which had to do with it. "But won't there be a king or prince to be considered in this kingdom of yours? or do you expect

your husband will let you do as you like with his possessions?"

"There will be no husband," said Eirene haughtily. "The possessions will be mine, mine alone. And you are making attempts to discover who I am."

"We aren't," said Maurice indignantly, while the guilty Zoe maintained a judicious silence. "How horribly suspicious you are, Eirene! Go and whisper your secret to the reeds, if you like. We shan't try to listen."

"I have been led into saying more than I intended," said Eirene, trying to extricate herself from an awkward situation with dignity. "I see that, according to your views, I have no right to object to your making imaginary schemes of reform for Emathia, and I do not object to it, while you understand that they are imaginary. That makes the whole difference."

Maurice stared at her. "What a lofty benediction!" he said. "Eirene, I'm afraid I shall offend again; but do you think your head is a little bit affected by all you have gone through? If it is, only tell us, and we shall know what to do. We will treat you as a queen in exile with pleasure."

"Now you are joking," smiled Eirene. "No, my dear brother and sister, continue to treat me as one of yourselves. Circumstances may divide us in the future, but I shall never forget what you have been to me during these weeks."

"Good gracious!" murmured Maurice, and laying his head back on his arms he whistled softly at the stars, while Zoe shook from head to foot in an unconquerable spasm of silent laughter, and Eirene sat gazing at the fire with a look of gentle melancholy.

The next evening Maurice returned smiling from his

colloquy with the brigands. "Well," he said, "my undignified and contemptible pursuits have given me quite an exciting piece of news for you. Wylie is looking us up."

"Oh, Maurice, what do you mean?" cried Zoe.

"Why, it seems that Demo and three others went down to-day to get food. At the village, wherever it is, they were told that an English traveller with one servant and a large quantity of luggage had stayed the night there, and gone on into the mountains, refusing a guide. Our fellows decided that such a chance was not to be lost, and having found out which way the traveller had gone, went across country by short cuts, and arranged a satisfactory ambush. They thought he must either be mad, or riding through in bravado after hearing about us, but the luggage would be all right, at any rate. I suppose he really was a newspaper man. Well, they waited in cover, and presently the traveller and his servant came along. The luggage looked so new and wealthy that it made their mouths water, but happily for themselves they didn't act in a hurry. 'They came near,' said Demo, 'and I recognised the servant. It was the Capitan. He was wearing Nizam dress, but I knew him by his accursed eyes; he couldn't disguise them. Then we saw that it was a trap, and we let them pass.'"

"But how was it a trap?" asked Eirene.

"Why, either Wylie and the other man were much better armed than they looked, and meant to capture a brigand or two, so as to make them reveal the hiding-places of the band, or they meant to be captured themselves, and had spies to follow them up and see where they were taken. I don't see why Wylie wanted to disguise himself, though. He might

have known he would be recognised if he was caught, and then they would be safe to kill him. As it was, he and the other man seem to have ridden through the brigands' country quite unmolested."

"I wish he wouldn't do such things!" said Zoe anxiously.

"Yes," said Eirene, "he ought to remember that we depend upon him for our ransom and rescue. He has no right to risk his life in foolish bravado."

"I think we may be pretty sure that Wylie had some 'cute idea in his head," said Maurice. "I don't quite see what it is; but he certainly risked being captured over again."

"And this captivity is certainly not tempting," said Zoe.

Wylie's plan declared itself unexpectedly the very next day. The prisoners had climbed up to what they called their afternoon ledge, a shelf of rock which caught the westering sun, and were looking out over the chaos of hills and valleys below them, and speculating for the nine hundred and ninety-ninth time upon the prospects of their release. Suddenly one of the brigands' sentries, who was stationed round a corner on their left, whence a view of the country to the eastward could be obtained, ran in and shouted to his comrades. Wild confusion instantly prevailed among the loungers in the hollow. Some of them quenched the fires with earth, a heap of which was kept ready for the purpose, and the rest caught up their weapons, and scaling the ledge, flung themselves upon the prisoners, who expected nothing but instant death. Not daring to move, they yielded helplessly to the violence of the brigands, who dragged them as far back as possible, so that they could only just see over the ledge, tore off the girls' head-hand-

kerchiefs, which showed white against the dark of the cliff, and ordered them, if they valued their lives, to make no sound or movement. Presently, the cause of the commotion came in sight far below—a column of Roumi soldiers, led by an officer on horseback. In front walked a man in plain clothes, examining the ground narrowly as he went.

“Captain Wylie! He has tracked us!” murmured Zoe, under her breath. Milosch turned upon her with a diabolical grin.

“Promise candles to ze saints zat he track you no furzer, zen. If he find ze way up ze stream, you go down ze mountain to meet him—you see?” He lifted Zoe’s chin, and with the point of his knife traced a line upon her neck. She shrank away from him, sick and almost fainting with horror, and he laughed. “We begin wiz you, after all,” he said.

CHAPTER XI.

TOO MUCH ZEAL.

"TAKE your dirty hands off her, you brute!" growled Maurice, struggling ineffectually with the two men who were holding him down. Milosch smiled again.

"You ze next," he said. "We leave you at ze camp—dead, oh, yes! and ze Roumi dogs will see how you died. Zere will be tree—four hours while zey find ze way, but for you it will experience tree or four days. And ze ozer girl,"—he cast a critical eye upon Eirene, who shivered in spite of her utmost efforts to maintain a firm front,—“we not kill her, no. We leave her also at ze camp, but living, to tell what she see.”

The strain was too great, and, with a little gasp, Eirene fainted away. Milosch chuckled. "Make not no mistakes," he added impressively to the furious Maurice. "It may be your friend achieve to discover you—yes; but you will compensate in blood for ze ransom he hope to defraud."

Maurice turned away with as much impassivity as he could muster. "Don't you go and faint too, Zoe," he said to his sister; "he's only trying to make our flesh creep. But don't trouble about Eirene. I don't suppose it will hurt her to stay as she is for the present, and it can't be any pleasure to her to hear him talk."

Zoe, who had been trying to get to Eirene, ceased

her struggles, and let her eyes return to the moving figures in the valley below. This was evidently a critical moment, for the brigands were watching their progress with strained attention. At last, when Wylie had passed a particular point, a gasp of satisfaction showed that, in the opinion of the band, the immediate danger was over.

"It's the stream that has thrown him out," muttered Maurice. "He'll go on ever so far looking for tracks before he guesses where we turned off."

"But how has he tracked us?" asked Zoe, who had now been released, and was holding Eirene's head on her knee, as the younger girl struggled slowly back to consciousness.

"By the marks of our boots, of course," said Maurice. "No one else in the mountains wears boots, and there has been no rain since we came up here. I say, I shall tell Wylie what I think of him when I see him next. He has no business to sacrifice us to his grudge against the brigands. That's the worst of him, he's an unforgiving brute, and the trick they played on him the day they pretended they were going to kill him rankles."

"Maurice, you are absurd!" Zoe was engrossed in her ministrations to Eirene, and could only talk in snatches. "He has some special reason for this. I am sure of it. He may have a grudge against the brigands, as you say, but he will wait to work it off until we are safe."

"Then what's he up to now?" demanded Maurice, and Zoe could offer no explanation. Eirene laughed weakly.

"Zoe would say to him with her last breath, 'I know you couldn't help it,' and Maurice, 'You brute! it's all your fault,'" she said.



"And you?" asked Zoe, rather tartly.

"It is not to be my last breath, you know"—Eirene shivered again as she rose shakily to her feet, with the help of Maurice's hand—"but I should say to him when we met, 'You see, sir, the results of an excess of zeal.'"

"Awfully scathing!" said Maurice, guiding her along the ledge. "I'm coming back for you, Zoe; wait for me. No wonder you feel shaky, after that sickening rascal's talk."

The camp seemed a haven of refuge after the experiences of the last half-hour, and the girls sank down thankfully on their straw bed, while Maurice seated himself on a stone at the door, and tried to make conversation and distract their minds, not very successfully. Stoyan succeeded where Maurice failed, however, for he made his appearance suddenly, and saying something in his own language, threw down a pair of leggings and moccasins before him, and held out his hand.

"He says I'm to put these on, and give him my boots," explained Maurice ruefully. "I'm afraid Wylie has let us in for it. He says, 'No sleep to-night, thanks to your friend.'"

"I suppose we had better pack up," said Zoe, as the chief retired with the boots.

"How I admire your common-sense, Zoe!" said Eirene, not offering to move. "Why don't you rest as long as you can, like me?"

"Because she knows you would look pretty blue if there were no coats and things at the next halting-place," said Maurice. "Come, get up. You can luxuriate in the straw as long as they'll let you, but we must roll up the rugs."

The rugs, wrapped round the scanty possessions of

the party, were Maurice's burden, while the girls carried the coats, rolled up as Wylie had shown them, so as to leave their arms free. But when they were summoned to start, about an hour before sunset, the brigands made them unfold the coats and put them on, drawing the hoods over their heads, so that they could not be recognised from a distance. They felt some surprise at starting in daylight, but the reason was soon evident. They were to climb down the torrent-bed, up which they had come to reach the valley, and not even the brigands cared to risk the descent in the dark. Scouts had been sent to follow Wylie and the Roumi force, and make sure that they were not returning, and these brought word that the troops had taken up their quarters in a village for the night, so that the move might safely be made. Going down the torrent-bed was rather worse than going up, so far as slips and tumbles and sudden sousings went, and the girls were bruised and drenched when they reached the bottom. They were only allowed a moment to wring their dripping skirts, and then the brigands set out briskly in the dusk, taking the direction in which Wylie had gone. They knew the rocky paths, and how to take advantage of the smoothest places, but to the prisoners, unused to walking in moccasins, every step was a lottery, which might prove painless, but was far more likely to be agonising. Even when a rare stretch of comparatively soft ground appeared, they were not allowed to take advantage of it, the brigands casting about carefully until they found a way past it on the rocks, lest any trail should remain to show that a number of people had passed there after the soldiers. Darkness came on, and the prisoners stumbled painfully along between their guards, who never stretched out a hand to help them, but reviled

them horribly when they slipped. Regardless of dignity, the girls were reduced at last to clutching the sleeves of the men on each side of them—more the brigands would not permit, for fear of finding their arms encumbered in case of danger—and even Eirene made no protest. After what seemed weary hours of walking, the brigands suddenly stopped and closed round the prisoners, two of the band stealing off into the darkness.

"We are going right through the village," whispered Maurice. "Those fellows are off to quiet the dogs."

"And if you raise exclamation, we quiet you," muttered Milosch, unsheathing his long dagger.

It was some time before the two men returned, with the assurance that all was well. The troops were comfortably quartered in the houses and cattle-sheds, and they had located the watch-fires and the sentries, and could guide the rest past them. Wylie and the Roumi officer were at the house of the chief man of the place, and Stoyan breathed a vehement and highly coloured aspiration that it had been prudent to creep in and make an end of them. But as this was impossible if the prisoners were to be placed in safe keeping, he repressed his bloodthirsty inclinations, and the scouts led the party in and out among huts and sheds, sometimes creeping on all-fours across a space dimly illuminated by a watch-fire, sometimes pausing behind a wall while a sentry passed. Every man among the brigands held his dagger unsheathed, ready to strike if any of the prisoners made the slightest attempt to raise an alarm, and the precaution was sufficient. Warmth, shelter, safety, friends, were in the village, and with bursting hearts the girls passed them by, and went on again into the dark cold night. They were so tired by this

time that their immediate guards were forced to sheathe their daggers and take each of them by the elbows to help her on, and as if to crown their misfortunes, a cold, drenching rain began to fall. It put the finishing touch also to the brigands' ill-humour, and they pushed and dragged their shivering captives roughly along, muttering angrily at every step.

"Maurice, tell them we can't go any faster!" cried Zoe at last. "We are keeping up with them on these awful roads, and we can't do more."

"Oh, that's not what's the matter," returned Maurice from behind, in a Mark-Tapleyan tone of voice. "They're calling us names for making them turn out of their nice comfortable camp and go wandering about the mountains in the dark and the wet. They say they have taken such care of us, and treated us as honoured guests, and our ingratitude is something detestable."

"Anybody might think we wanted to come!" said Zoe.

"Well, it certainly is our fault in a way," said Maurice. "If we didn't exist, or weren't here, they wouldn't be running away from Wylie."

They relapsed into silence again, and the grumbling curses of the brigands were the only sounds to be heard above the plashing of footsteps and the swish of the rain. The girls were half-unconscious with fatigue and want of sleep, and stumbled on in a kind of waking dream. It must have been drawing near dawn, though the blank black skies showed no sign of it, when the brigands paused again, in the shelter of a clump of stunted trees, hardly more than bushes, and the scouts glided forth on their errand. They returned unexpectedly soon, and their report called forth ominous curses.

"There are soldiers holding the path in front," explained Maurice in a whisper to the girls. "Wylie knows what he is doing, bad luck to him! He's got us between two fires, with all his precautions."

For the moment it looked as though Wylie had actually brought about the death of his friends, for the brigands were now thoroughly roused. "Kill the European dogs, kill them and get rid of them!" was the murmur. "They have brought us to this pass. Let us kill them and leave their bodies here on the track for their friend to find." Daggers were once more unsheathed, and revolvers drawn.

"Why don't you pray? Are you an atheist?" demanded Eirene of Zoe, breaking off in the middle of a catalogue of saints, whose aid she was audibly imploring.

"No; I am praying," said Zoe, but she felt curiously resigned. Death would be such a rest after this dreadful night. But the reference to Wylie, which Maurice translated under pressure, disturbed her. He would never be able to forgive himself if he realised what he had done. If only one of them could escape, it might make him a little less miserable. She sat up with an effort, and grasped Maurice's arm.

"Maurice, even if they kill us, you might escape. You can run, and your things don't cling so. We will make as much fuss as possible, to give you time to get away to the soldiers."

"Don't be an owl," said Maurice brusquely. "Is it likely? I ask you, is it likely?"

"But so much depends on you. We don't signify."

"What depends on Maurice?" demanded Eirene, with keen curiosity. Zoe recollected herself, in part.

"Oh, well, he is the last of the name, you know," she said.

"The last of the name of Smith?" asked Eirene innocently.

"No—er—the last of our Smiths," Zoe managed to say, and broke into hopeless laughter, until Maurice shook her, and asked her whether she wanted the brigands to think that terror had driven her mad. It seemed that their fate was no longer in suspense, since Milosch, of all people, had come to the rescue. This was not through any softness of heart, but because, representing, as he did, the Thracian committee which directed the brigands' movements, he had been able to paint in vivid terms the wrath and disappointment which would pervade that august body on the discovery that the prisoners whose ransom was to have added so largely to its funds had simply been wasted.

"There must be a way up the mountain," he said, "so that we could turn aside from the path without even approaching the Roumi dogs."

"There is," said Zeko, "but it is such a way that a man must cling to the rocks with both hands and his toes and his teeth. How can women climb it?"

"Women can do what they are obliged to do," said Milosch, with his evil grin.

"This settles it," said Zoe, as Maurice translated the words. "If our lives depend on our climbing up there, or even walking any farther, why, we shall have to be killed. Look, Maurice, our moccasins are cut to pieces, and my feet are bleeding—so are Eirene's. We can't walk another step, and you can tell them so."

It was unnecessary for Maurice to speak, however, for one of the brigands came in to report, with much indignation, that Zoe's feet had left spots of blood on the track, which the rain had not quite washed off, and the rest were forced to perceive that the girls were really incapable of walking farther. Again there were

suggestions of a short and sharp way out of the difficulty, and again Milosch interposed as *deus ex machina*.

"You say that these Roumi swine have two sentries on the path, and that the rest are sheltering in the ruined hut below? Well, be sure that the sentries will join the rest as soon as it is daylight, for what sane man would stand out in the rain when he might be in shelter? They will not expect us to break through by day, and if the saints only grant them sleep after they have eaten, we may pass without their even seeing us. If they should seek to prevent us, we can use the prisoners as a screen against their bullets, and escape ourselves."

"It is well said," remarked the chief, whose own financial stake in the matter was considerable. "At least we will do what we can to save the ransom. We will remain here for the present."

The prospect was not very cheering, for the rain dripped down from the sodden trees on the soaked ground, and everything was wet. Maurice took matters into his own hands. Gathering together some fallen branches, he arranged them on the driest spot he could find, and asked Zeko for matches. The brigands laughed grimly at the request.

"If you must kill the ladies, you may as well do it at once," he responded promptly, "and not leave them to die of cold and wet. No one could distinguish smoke in this mist, even if there was any one looking out."

Unless the suggestion had accorded with the brigands' own inclinations, it would probably still have been scouted, but in the prevailing cold and discomfort the idea of a fire appealed to them powerfully, and they collected more sticks, and laboured strenuously to get the wet wood to burn.

It was a very smoky and cheerless fire, at best, but it put a little warmth into the girls' shivering frames, and Maurice toasted the soaked morsels of black bread and dingy cheese which were thrown to them, and induced them to eat. The brigands had been consulting together during the meal, and at its close Stoyan called Maurice aside, addressing him in a reasonable, "man-and-brother" way, which amused him by its cool assumption that their interests were the same.

"You must see clearly," he said, "that we cannot remain here. At any cost we must pass the soldiers in front. Out of consideration for your sisters we have refrained from dragging them up the rocks, and you must, therefore, make them understand that they must walk a little way farther. Let them bind up their feet, so as to leave no track, and once beyond the pass we shall be able to procure horses for them. We are bound for a safe hiding-place, where they will find rest and comfort, and women to attend upon them. Surely you can see that it is better for them to make this slight effort than to be left dead upon the road?"

"I do quite see it," responded Maurice, after a moment's thought. It was clear that, for the moment, their interests did indeed lie with those of the brigands, since any attempt to reach the soldiers or delay the march meant death. He went back to the girls and explained things to them, and they set to work wearily to tie up their wounded feet in such rags as they could muster, replacing the torn moccasins over them. Presently one of the scouts came in to report that the Roumi sentries had rejoined their comrades at the ruined hut, thus leaving the way above clear, and the march was resumed immediately, the girls

tottering as best they could on either side of Maurice, who alone had an arm to spare for them. The brigands had all unslung their rifles and looked to the cartridges, and were proceeding in a rough open order, with the scouts a little way in advance. Suddenly they came to a standstill, with an involuntary gasp of astonishment. Facing them, climbing the slope from the ruined hut, were the Roumi soldiers, whose surprise was equally patent with their own. It would have been difficult to say which party had less expected to see the other, but the brigands were prepared for the emergency, while the soldiers were not. Their rifles were slung on their backs for convenience in climbing, and they were scattered on the face of the slope. A sharp order from the brigand chief confronted them with the muzzles of twenty rifles, and with a howl of horror they turned and fled. Half of the band pursued them—the rest remaining to guard the prisoners—firing off their rifles and whooping with delight. The pursuit was not a long one, for Stoyan's whistle recalled his men quickly, and sending one back to discover whether the sounds of the skirmish had penetrated to the force with which Wylie was, he led the rest forward for some distance, till they came to a place where two tracks met. One man was sent on down the lower and left-hand path, while the main body disposed themselves among the rocks, well out of sight of the road, and Milosch, approaching the prisoner, said to Zoe—

“You give ze Voivoda cutting.”

This mild horticultural request was so surprising that Zoe looked at him in perplexity, whereupon he pointed impatiently to her dress. The neat striped flannel coat and skirt on which she had so long ago

prided herself was now in sadly reduced circumstances, the skirt especially having been curtailed to the most approved "mountaineering length."

"Oh, give them a piece of yours, Eirene, can't you?" she said. "You really have more left."

"Oh no, it is yours he wants," said Eirene quickly. "He thinks Captain Wylie will recognise it."

Zoe glared at her for this tactless speech, and reluctantly tore off a strip which was hanging loose between two of the brown patches she had put in. Watching the chief with some curiosity, she saw that he tore it in two, and dexterously entangled one piece in a thorny bush some little way up the ascending path on the right, and then went on up the hill, evidently intending to do the same with the other farther on. The intention of the manœuvre was obvious, and the prisoners did not know whether to sigh for the deception to be practised on Wylie, or to rejoice that his perilous presence was to be removed from them. After some time, the brigand who had gone down the hill reappeared with an ancient horse, very thin and almost blind, and the girls were, without ceremony, mounted one behind the other, with the rugs as an apology for a saddle. They and Maurice were then blindfolded, and the descent began, the brigands displaying their usual distrust of smooth or soft ground, and leading the horse down the rockiest places, which was good strategy, but made exceedingly uncomfortable riding. For once, each girl was really thankful that her companion's eyes were unable to see the shifts to which she was put in order to maintain her balance. At length the descent became somewhat less steep, and the old horse stumbled gallantly along a fairly level track, his two riders almost asleep, in spite of their uneasy position. They stopped with

a jerk at last, and heard some one pouring forth an exciting narrative to the chief. Maurice came up to them softly.

"It is the fellow who was sent back," he said. "He followed the retreating soldiers until they came to the village, and met Wylie's force just setting out in this direction. Wylie meant to sweep the country, you see, and if the sentries above here had not left their posts, the two detachments must have caught the brigands between them. Of course, it's just as well for us personally that they didn't."

"What did Captain Wylie say?" asked Zoe.

"When he heard we had broken through? Oh, Demo says, 'Their own Bimbashi beat the flying soldiers with his sword, but the Capitan cursed them in bitter, biting words, far worse than any beating, for if the evil eye ever rested on any man, it did on them!'"

"If I were Captain Wylie, I should curse myself," said Eirene succinctly, just as Milosch summoned her and Zoe to dismount. Followed by Maurice, they were led a wearying round, in and out of doors, up and down stairs, into a tower, a farmyard, a granary, and a kitchen (as they judged by the smells that met them), until they were hopelessly confused as to the direction in which they had come. Then they were pushed in at a low door, and the bandages were suddenly removed from their eyes. They were in darkness, but other senses than that of sight convinced them that they stood in a cattle-stable.

"Oh, Maurice, the dirt!" gasped Zoe, as her foot sank into yielding mud.

"Go on! go on!" cried Milosch behind, prodding Maurice in the back with the muzzle of his rifle—an action which has a distinctly disquieting effect

upon the person acted on—and Zeko's voice in front called them to come forward. Following the direction of the words, they saw a faint glimmer of grey, defining the shape of another doorway, with the outline of Zeko's beckoning arm dark against it. Stumbling through the mud, they reached the threshold, and found themselves in a cave or underground room hewn out in the rock. Part of the ceiling was of rock, the rest, through which the light glimmered, was apparently the badly fitting flooring of a room above. Sacks and large earthenware jars, with various boxes, seemed to show that the place was the receptacle for all the household valuables, but there was nothing that could be called furniture. Zeko shut the door with a bang, and they heard him piling up fodder—or something else that deadened sound—against it on the outside. They were imprisoned underground.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DIVINE FIGURE OF THE NORTH.

"DEAR WYLIE,—I am sorry to have to tell you that in consequence of the action of the authorities in sending troops against them, Stoyan and his band have now increased the ransom they demand for us to twenty thousand pounds. They also say that if the pursuit continues, first one and then another of us will be killed, and the ransom for the remaining one will be raised by five thousand pounds a-week. I tell you honestly that the efforts of the troops can have no result beyond irritating the brigands and making our position worse, and that we are at this moment hidden where I believe no power on earth could find us. The ladies agree with me, very reluctantly.—Yours truly,

"MAURICE SMITH.

"ZOE SMITH.

"EIRENE SMITH."

This was written on the upper half of a sheet from Zoe's large note-book, and at the foot appeared the following, which could be torn off before the recipient made the first portion public:—

"For goodness' sake, Wylie, drop it. Your intentions are excellent, but they don't seem to come off.

The girls are half-dead with exhaustion after the way you have been hunting us about, and we are at present cheerfully accommodated underground, with only the faintest glimmer of light. I couldn't tell you where we are if I would, and I wouldn't if I could. For some reason or other the brigands have taken a dislike to you, and if you persist in staying up here, I am given to understand that you will find yourself confronted with our dead bodies in various uncomfortable attitudes. Cut away to Therma and hurry up that ransom. This is the kindest thing you can do for us."

On his return from the vain pursuit of the brigands which followed the meeting with the routed detachment, Wylie discovered this letter pinned with a dagger to the doorpost of the house where he had taken up his quarters. None of the villagers had seen who brought it, and no one could offer any suggestion on the subject, but whether the universal ignorance was real, or the result of a secret understanding with the brigands, did not appear. The letter had the desired effect, sending Wylie back to Therma in something more nearly approaching panic than he had ever known. He was not as reckless of the lives of his friends as he had appeared, but he had undoubtedly brought them into imminent peril, though his course had been adopted in utter desperation. His first appearance at Therma, bearing the story of what had happened and the demand for a ransom, had been the signal for the commencement of a wild tragi-comedy of irresponsibility. The Roumi authorities declared flatly that there were no brigands in Emathia, so that it was obviously impossible that the travellers could have been carried off by brigands. The British representatives, to whom Wylie appealed at the same time,

cherished grave doubts as to the wisdom of paying a ransom, since no British traveller in Emathia would be safe after such a precedent had been set. Professor Panagiotis, torn by conflicting emotions, proved almost equally unsatisfactory. He had found himself of late subjected to a disquieting espionage, which filled him with fear lest his plans had in some way been divined. In such a case, it seemed to him that his only chance was to grip his important secret more tightly than ever. Lest Wylie should make use of it to bring pressure on any of the Governments concerned, he kept it even from him, pooh-poohing his reminder of the explanations Maurice had promised him, and showing an uneasy curiosity on the subject of Eirene, for whose existence he could not account. He volunteered, indeed, to write to Maurice's bankers, asking them to advance the money for the ransom, with the natural result that they demanded either a cheque signed by Maurice or an interview with Wylie and a sight of his authority, and Wylie could not bring himself to leave Emathia while his friends' fate hung in the balance. The Professor's sole useful contribution to the debate was the conviction that the outrage had been perpetrated by a band of Thracian marauders, with which the newspapers in his interest made Europe ring. The Thracian Government, approached on the subject, replied with virtuous indignation that its attitude was perfectly correct. It had always studiously discouraged—in the most official manner—the formation of such bands, and refused them permission to cross the frontier into Emathia. If the reprehensible activity of private persons had managed to organise a band, the authorities viewed it with entire detachment, and the Roumi Government was welcome to do as it liked with the members, when it caught them.

This acknowledgment that there might be foreign, though not native, brigands on the sacred soil of Emathia stirred the Roumi officials to a pitch of activity positively dangerous. Urged on by Professor Panagiotis and his adherents, they sent troops into the hills, and loudly proclaimed their intention of sweeping the miscreants from the face of the earth, and rescuing the captives without fee or reward. Into the vortex of this expedition Wylie was whirled, partly by the demand of the authorities that he should accompany the troops and behold the vengeance exacted, partly by his own hope that he might be able to make the measures taken effectual. His friend Palmer, smarting under the loss of the faithful Haji Ahmad, had willingly joined him in a bold journey through the heart of the brigands' country, in the hope that the luggage so lavishly displayed would prove a bait sufficient to ensure their being carried off also, when the best trackers in the country, provided by Professor Panagiotis, would follow them up, and thus discover the brigands' stronghold. Demo's recognition of Wylie in his disguise had prevented this, but the journey had its fruit in the discovery of the boot-tracks of the captives, and thus enabled Wylie to lay his plans for a systematic search. As Maurice had conjectured, it was the torrent-bed, the use of which as a path he had not suspected, which had thrown him out when he felt certain that he had the brigands safe in one particular group of hills, and the carelessness of the detachment which had been sent on to hold the pass enabled his prey to slip through his fingers. Thus baffled, he had no alternative but to hurry back to Therma, in compliance with Maurice's earnest request, only to find fresh discouragements awaiting him. Before leaving for the hills, he had

written a full account of the capture to Maurice's bankers, enclosing a certified copy of the first letter signed by the three captives, in the hope that they might be induced to depart from their attitude of severe correctness. Their answer had now arrived, making it evident that the worthy country gentlemen, who had known Maurice and Zoe all their lives, and their parents and grandparents before them, regarded the intrusion of Eirene into the letter as evidence of a not very cleverly constructed plot, concocted, it was to be presumed, by Wylie and Professor Panagiotis, for the purpose of extorting money. Whether they imagined the Professor and Wylie were holding the captives in durance, or doubted their being in durance at all, or what they thought Eirene had to do with the matter, they did not say, but they wound up a lengthy refusal to do anything without seeing Wylie, with the coldly sarcastic remark that the Roumi Government was obviously the proper channel from which to obtain the ransom.

"Why can't the old idiots see that it's a matter of life and death?" mused Wylie bitterly, as he read the letter on the terrace of his hotel. "I'm not going cap in hand to them to be treated like a pickpocket and sent off with a flea in my ear, while the Smiths are being massacred. I'd rather pay the money myself. I wonder if I could manage to raise it in the time? I don't see where it's to come from. Or is there any one else I could worry into taking action?"

He thought over the long list of people to whom he had written urgent letters—every one he had ever heard of who was likely to have influence with the press or with any of the Governments interested in Emathia—and realised wrathfully that, though his journalistic appeals had produced a good deal of frothy

rhetoric and bloodthirsty declamation in the columns of newspapers of the baser sort, the practical effect appeared to be *nil*. True, an artist on the staff of the 'Plastic,' who happened to be in the neighbourhood—as distances go in Eastern Europe—had been ordered to the scene of the capture, which was now, on the well-established principle of the steed and the stable-door, kept constantly patrolled by police, and had made many sketches of the localities concerned, but without stirring the placid blood of the public to any extraordinary heat. He had moved on to Therma now, and was staying at the hotel, and as Wylie halted irresolutely in his anger and perplexity outside the window of the smoking-room, he came out and joined him.

"I say, you don't mind my speaking to you, do you?" he asked, in a pleasant, boyish voice. "I know you're the man who was captured with the Smiths, and I want to find out something about them. I'm sick of sketching a set of rotten roadsides—might as well be a camera at once—and there's not a sensation in the whole lot. What I'm thinking of is a full-page drawing of the outrage itself—call it a fancy picture if you like, but that's the sort of thing that tells. Besides, if I work up the figures from your description, it's not a fancy picture. Do you mind?"

"I don't mind what I do that's likely to give the slightest help in rescuing them," said Wylie emphatically.

"I know. Horribly rough on them and you too—all this red tape. Let's go ahead, then. What sort of a chap is Smith?"

"Cambridge man, usual style, nothing particular about him, but an awfully good sort. His eldest sister told me that he got a gold medal for poetry this spring, but you'd never think it to look at him."

"A gold medal? Not for an English poem? I was there myself, and there was no Smith in. My young brother got a medal for a Greek epigram, and he was so keen on my seeing him in all his glory that I ran down for the day. Took the opportunity to get half a page of sketches for the 'Daily Plastic,' too, as the affair isn't much known. They keep the date dark lest the men should get in and rag—so my brother told me. Now what was the chap's name who got the English medal? It was a St Saviour's man, and the Master was so proud he talked of nothing else for a week."

"Miss Smith told me her brother got it," said Wylie, in the tone which implies that there is no more to be said.

"But there must be a mistake somewhere. Look here; I believe I have that very sketch-book in my room. I'll get it, and we can see the fellow's name."

He vanished indoors, and presently returned breathless, flicking over the leaves of a well-filled sketch-book.

"Here it is!" he cried. "Teffany! I knew there was something queer about the name." He put the book into his companion's hands, and Wylie found himself confronted with an unmistakable portrait of Maurice in cap and gown, wearing a rather strained smile, and gripping a roll of paper very tight. In close proximity was a sketch of Professor Panagiotis, all alert attention, bending forward to listen.

"Why, that's Smith!" cried Wylie, "and this——"

"Yes, it's awfully rummy, isn't it? That's the old johnny who hangs out at Kallimeri, close here. It gave me quite a shock when I met him in the street, but then I remembered that my brother told me he was some Greek bigwig. Then my man is your man, after all? I say, this is something like a joke!"

"But what possible reason can he have had for changing his name?" cried Wylie, trying to recall anything that ought to have prepared him for the discovery.

"And there's another thing," said the artist, who was enjoying himself hugely. "He's got a sister too many. Teffany has only one, I know. She came up to Girtham at the same time that he entered at St Saviour's, and they were called 'The Orphans' everywhere, because they used to go about together in deep mourning. It was for their grandfather, though. Their father was killed in the Soudan years before, and their mother died from the shock. So where does the other girl come in?"

"Of course she is only a half-sister; I knew that."

"But younger than either of them, you say? Oh, this is brain-splitting! She must be a cousin."

"Really," said Wylie stiffly, "I see no reason for us to trouble about the matter. No one ever doubted that she was their sister."

"Well, we seem to have come upon a nice little double mystery. Look here, monsieur," the artist cried to a man who was standing just inside the smoking-room, "come and adjudicate. What reason could a man have, whose name wasn't Smith, for calling himself Smith, when he was doing nothing more heinous than coming with his sisters to stay with Professor Panagiotis?"

"English, of course?" said the stranger, joining them, and speaking with a slight foreign accent. "Why need one seek a reason, then? The pseudo-Smith is rich—perhaps noble—at home, and he desires a new sensation. Therefore he obtains one by travelling *incognito*."

"Well, I suppose Teffany is comfortably off"—the

stranger's eyelid flickered as the artist spoke—"but there are no titles in the family, that I know of. Why in the world should he do it?"

"The natural modesty of the British character," suggested the stranger.

"And there's another thing. Why should he call a girl his sister who isn't his sister?"

"If you ask me," said the stranger waggishly, "I should say that it was some one else's sister."

"Oh, but two of them?" cried the artist. "Or, if one was genuine, how do you account for her tolerating the bogus one?"

"Look here," said Wylie, "that will do. You, and Smith's—I mean Teffany's—bankers, and Professor Panagiotis, all persist that there can't be a second sister. I tell you there is, for I have seen her and talked to her. I have the honour of both the Miss Smiths—the Miss Teffanys', I mean—acquaintance, and whatever stupid mystery you may manage to cook up, I'm certain there's the most ordinary explanation if we only knew it. I don't want any more jokes on the subject."

"Awfully sorry," said the artist hastily, as the stranger withdrew with a smile; "but it is funny, you know."

"To you, perhaps. Who's your grinning friend?"

"A Greek—Mitsopoulos his name is—good sort of chap. Knows the ropes, puts me up to all sorts of things. His sister is married to the Scythian Consul-General—frightfully handsome woman. But he's only staying here."

"I don't know why you called him in," said Wylie uneasily. "We don't want Scythia mixed up in this business."

The artist stared at him. "Oh, I say," he laughed,

"there's no doubt where you come from, is there? 'Keep your powder dry, and hate a Scythian like the devil'—that's about the mark of you North-West Frontier men, isn't it?"

"What do you know about the North-West Frontier?" growled Wylie. "I'm off to Professor Panagiotis to get this thing cleared up. I shall end by wringing the old blighter's neck for him, I know."

"So long!" said the artist pacifically, for he had not yet got all the information he wanted, and he settled down to a sketch for his picture, leaving the girls' faces blank, while Wylie, refusing the offers of donkey-boys and cab-drivers, tramped off to Kallimeri. The Professor had learnt to dread his coming, and distinguished on this occasion in the very sound of his footsteps fresh cause for alarm. Wylie gave him no opportunity of denying the identification established by the sketch, but demanded bluntly the reason of the change of name, and why he had not been told of it before. The only course was to explain the whole of the circumstances, and this the Professor took.

"You see, then," he ended, "that not a breath of this must creep out. Our young friend stands in the way of both Scythian and Thraco-Dardanian ambitions, and if it was known who he was, it would be fatally easy to arrange for his death—at the hands of the brigands, by a fall in the mountains, by a shot from a Roumi rifle. It would occur so naturally that there would be no room for inquiry, and his sister, who would otherwise inherit his claims, would share his fate. Now do you see why I kept you in the dark? It was for their sake. I feared that by some inadvertence"—Wylie moved angrily—"Well, now that you know the truth, and what hangs upon your silence, you will see that nothing must be said. There is a

dangerous man at your hotel—Nicetas Mitsopoulo, a Greek traitor in Scythian employ—beware of him."

"Your warning comes a little late. The gentleman you mention was present when I discovered the truth."

Professor Panagiotis flung up his hands in despair. "Then Maurice Tefany and his sister are as good as dead! My hopes are destroyed."

"Don't blither about your hopes," said Wylie savagely, "but think what we can do. What chance have we of saving them?"

"If we can raise the ransom by the very day stipulated—the brigands are generally faithful to their word—but if it is an hour late——"

"Then the ransom must be raised, by hook or by crook. Can you advance it? I will give you my bond for all I am worth, and I am certain Smith will regard the rest as a debt of honour."

"Alas, no! It is not in my power," groaned the Professor.

"Nonsense! you are well known to be a rich man. How much can you lay your hands upon in ten days?"

"I—I must explain to you," said the Professor diffidently, "that events have advanced since I had the good fortune to discover Mr Tefany. In view of the happy prospects of the Greek cause, I have felt justified in promoting a certain degree of organisation among its adherents—enabling them to defend their homes against their ruthless Slavic assailants——"

"And institute reprisals, no doubt?" said Wylie. "This means, of course, that you have been arming the Emathian Greeks against the Slavs, by way of improving matters?"

"And the cost has been very heavy," pursued the Professor, with humility, "and one large consignment of—defence weapons—fell, unfortunately, into the

hands of one of the Thracian committees, so that I am actually straitened."

"Well, can you beg, borrow, or steal five thousand pounds by the end of next week? I think I ought to be able to manage the other fifteen thousand, by realising everything I have in the world. If not, you must scrape together the difference. At any cost we must stop Mr Mitsopoulo's little games."

Had Wylie been present at a certain discussion at the Scythian Consulate that evening, he would have realised that Nicetas Mitsopoulo was playing even a deeper game than he imagined. The Greek arrived at a private door, which was opened to him by the Consul-General himself, a big, fair man, whose bluff exterior concealed a very serviceable share of diplomatic *finesse*.

"Welcome, Nikita Feodorovitch!" he said pleasantly. "You will find Chariclea ready for you. Curiously enough, immediately after your message arrived, a sudden headache prevented her from going to the party at the Cimbrian Consul's."

M. Mitsopoulo pushed past his brother-in-law rather impatiently, for the Consul-General was always ready to find amusement, such as the professional plotter had long since outgrown, in these tricks of the trade. Much more in sympathy with him was his sister, Madame Ladoguin, or Chariclea Feodorovna, as she was called by her Scythian acquaintances. A handsome woman in a loose Levantine dress, with her dark hair hanging below her waist in two heavy plaits, she awaited him on a cushioned divan in her boudoir, with cigarettes and the ever-ready samovar at hand. M. Ladoguin lounged in after him, and sat down at a little distance, ready to act as friend of the court.

"This has been a day of events and surprises," said

Mitsopoulo, accepting a glass of tea, with thin slices of lemon floating in it, from his sister. "I have made such progress that I am almost bewildered, and I bring the results of my labours to you, Chariclea, that you may check them and assure me I have not deceived myself."

"I will scrutinise them as rigorously as if they were the report of a Reform Scheme," she answered, with a lazy smile.

"That is just what I want. You have guessed, I am sure, Chariclea, that my visit here was in connection with the disappearance, which was not made known to the public, of a young lady of high rank. All the indications seemed to point to her having escaped to America, but as the Greek Panagiotis was known to have tampered with her father, it was thought well to watch for her here. I placed the amiable Panagiotis under surveillance, which I fear he has found inconvenient, but as it did not appear that he was either holding or expecting any communication with the Princess, I was about to withdraw it. Then, only a week ago, one of my agents brought word that a breast-ornament of gold and rubies, of a unique Byzantine design, had been offered for sale secretly by a Jew in this city. The description corresponded with that of one of the jewels which had disappeared with the Princess, and I authorised the man to secure it at any cost, but, alas! at the first hint of inquiry it disappeared again, and has probably been broken up. Until to-day, therefore, I thought it probable that the Princess had eluded my vigilance and was in hiding here, subsisting by the sale of her jewels until she found it safe to communicate with Panagiotis." He paused impressively.

"Yes, and now?" asked Mme. Ladoguin.

"To-day I was summoned to assist at a conversation between a brainless artist staying at the hotel, and the English officer who was captured with the renowned Smiths——"

"Are you quite sure you were not assisting before you were summoned, Nikita?" laughed the Consul-General. His brother-in-law passed over the question as unworthy of an answer.

"—And I discovered a very curious fact, vouched for by three separate authorities, that one of the ladies passing as Miss Smith is not a Miss Smith at all. Mr and Miss Smith have no sister, and Panagiotis, with whom they were to stay, did not expect a second lady guest."

"Well?" demanded Mme. Ladoguin, her eyes glowing sombrely.

"The idea came to me in a flash, but it was too improbable to accept without investigation. I went at once to the station, and by great good fortune succeeded in finding the guard of the train that was wrecked near Przlepk. Otherwise I might have had to wait two or three days. He recollected the party perfectly, and described them—the brother an ordinary, impassive Englishman, one sister vivacious in the wooden English way, but the other totally different. He said himself that he would have guessed her to be a Scythian, as also the aunt who was killed in the accident. With another happy flash, I asked him if he had happened to visit the aunt's grave at Przlepk. He had done so, and the name upon the stone was Evdotia Vladimirovna. That was the Christian name of Madame Lyofsky, the lady-in-waiting who vanished with the Princess."

"Excellent! Well done! Continue, pray!" cried Mme. Ladoguin, clapping her hands softly.

"I could get no more from the man, for he had, of course, only been able to observe the Smiths from Tatarjé to Przlepka. To obtain further information, I must go myself to Tatarjé and question the car-attendant on the Orient Express, who must have plenty to tell. But at present, what is your view of the case, my dear Chariclea?"

"There can only be one view," she responded quickly. "The Princess fell in with these Smiths in Paris, and either by bribery or entreaty, induced them to adopt Mme. Lyofsky and herself as members of their party, flattering herself that she would thus escape discovery."

"So I should have thought but for something else that I learned to-day. The man Smith and his sister are in reality no more Smith than the Princess is. Their true name is Teffany."

"Well?" asked the Consul-General curiously.

"Teffany—which is Theophanis," said M. Mitsopoulo. His sister sprang up from her cushions.

"What! Nicetas, you don't mean——"

"I mean that Panagiotis has succeeded, where his predecessors failed, in unearthing or manufacturing an English representative of the senior male line of the descendants of John Theophanis."

"But why then trouble himself with the Princess?" asked M. Ladoguin helplessly.

"Oh, that's clear enough," was the contemptuous reply of his wife. "She is to marry the claimant."

"Now there I can't agree with you, Chariclea," said her brother. "Panagiotis is far too wise for that. The united claims of the two would be absolutely unassailable, and there would be no room for him. He might choose to arrange such a marriage by slow degrees, inventing hindrances and delays so as to make

his own services appear indispensable, but it would be madness to begin by throwing the two young people together."

"But we can hardly charge the worthy Professor with the railway accident and the capture by the brigands, can we?" asked M. Ladoguin, laughing. "We know better than that."

"No, that was certainly unforeseen on his part. But why plot so clumsily as to let them travel by the same train?"

"He must have had some scheme for separating them as soon as they became interested in one another," suggested Mme. Ladoguin, without much conviction.

"Now I am going to propound a common-sense view of the matter, since you two clever people are at a loss," said her husband. "What if Panagiotis has washed his hands of the girl—the Princess, I mean—since he discovered his male heir; and what if she took the journey entirely on her own account, enraged at the neglect of her claims? That would account for his not expecting her. The meeting with the Smiths would then be a pure coincidence."

"Absurd!" said Mme. Ladoguin sharply, following the sound Higher Critical rule of rejecting the obvious. "Do you suggest that these young people, whose interests are diametrically opposed, fell in love at first sight, like characters of Shakespeare, and agreed to— to pool their respective claims?"

"Possibly. Isn't it more reasonable than to suppose that Panagiotis brought them together and explained the situation, with a view to a State marriage?"

"Stop!" cried Mitsopoulo suddenly. "Adopting the coincidence theory provisionally, must we suppose

that the situation is explained at all? In my view, Panagiotis arranged the disappearance of the Princess, but she was too impatient to await the date he had fixed. He had intended to produce her a month or so hence, when the young man was entirely in his power; but naturally he says nothing to either of them. She escapes sooner than he wished, and falls in with the other claimant and his sister in Paris. There was the coincidence. Now, is it likely that either party would even be aware of the other's existence, since it is to the interest of Panagiotis to keep them in ignorance for his own purposes? Therefore, why should they confide in each other at all?"

"Oh, but everything must have come out since—or at least, half of everything," said M. Ladoguin, generalising unwisely on a common-sense basis. "The man and his sister, who are new to the idea of their dignity, could not possibly keep silence." Mitsopoulou nodded, remembering Zoe's confidence to Wylie about the gold medal, and his brother-in-law went on, much encouraged. "With the Princess it is different. She must be capable of determined secrecy, from the skill with which she concealed her preparations for escape, and she has long believed herself the heir of the Eastern Empire. Finding herself confronted with a claim antagonistic and superior to her own, what will be her impulse? Will it not be to retain her secret haughtily, watching for the chance of crushing her rival? I should say that if you want her back, you will find her thankful to come."

"Do you want her back?" asked Mme. Ladoguin.

"Most certainly," replied her brother; "she is an invaluable asset, tracing an uninterrupted Greek and Orthodox descent from John Theophanis. The Englishman's claim is the best by the ordinary law

of Europe, but would break down hopelessly when tried by the Imperial family statutes. She ought to have been married long ago, and her claim carried into the Scythian Imperial house; but she is in a troublesome position—too important and yet not important enough. It is believed that she aspired to an alliance with the Emperor himself—and if I had had the direction of affairs I fancy I should have settled it in that way. But it was otherwise decided, and she rejected with contumely the Grand Duke Ivan Petrovitch, who was suggested to her as a suitor. She also took matters into her own hands, or Panagiotis persuaded her that she did."

"Then she must be taken care of, I suppose," drawled Mme. Ladoguin, "which is a pity, or she might have been disposed of with the other inconveniences. They are merely inconveniences, are they not? A judicious massacre, now, or an accident with the dynamite which these reprehensible bands of brigands manage somehow to get hold of?"

"No, I think not," said her brother, after a moment's reflection. "You forget Panagiotis, and that blue-eyed swashbuckler who was captured with them. They will make out that we were anxious to get rid of the man and his claims, and there will be unpleasantness. What must be done is to make him confess the baselessness of his pretensions. He must own that he was tempted by Panagiotis to put himself forward as a Theophanis, without the slightest ground for the assertion. That will dispose of both him and his sister. How the details are to be arranged we must discuss another day."

"I should recommend the monastery of Hadgi-Antoniou if you want any one kept out of the way for an indefinite time," smiled M. Ladoguin.

"Just so; and plenty of palm-oil to obviate any difficulties. I must get an order for funds from Pavelsburg," said Mitsopoulo.

Wylie also was seeking funds at that moment. A letter to his lawyers was directing them to sell out all his securities, and to mortgage to its utmost value the little Border estate which called him master. However onerous the conditions, he must have fifteen thousand pounds in ten days.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FALLING-OUT OF FAITHFUL FRIENDS.

CHEERLESS though the underground prison might be, it offered a respite from further journeying, and for the moment the captives could think of nothing else. Exhausted by the long night spent in tramping through the rain, the girls asked only for rest, and a sack of corn for pillow, with a rug for coverlet, furnished as luxurious a couch as they could need. They were asleep in a moment, and Maurice envied them. He had chosen his own sleeping-place close to the door, but he could not rest until he had built up the boxes and sacks into a barricade which might shelter the girls from prying eyes. It seemed to him that the noise he made would wake anybody, but Zoe and Eirene never stirred, and he erected a very fair partition, and retired thankfully to his own sack and rug on the threshold. He was not allowed to sleep, however, for a beam of light appeared at the other end of the cellar, and a voice called him. Rising with much reluctance, he found that a board of the crazy flooring above had been lifted, and a basket containing writing materials was being lowered down, while Milosch instructed him through the hole as to the terms of the letter he was to write to Wylie. The circumstances might excuse a certain acerbity in the

wording, and Maurice was conscious of a savage satisfaction as he added his postscript, scarcely able to see, so drowsy was he. Even when he had finished his letter, it was sent down to him again that the girls might add their signatures, and he was obliged to wake them in turn, and actually guide their hands over the paper. Then at last he was left in peace, and lay down and slept for eight hours without waking. It was the girls' voices that roused him at last. He could hear them talking.

"Do you think they mean to starve us?" murmured Eirene.

"I don't know. I'm *frightfully* hungry," returned Zoe.

The suggestion reminded Maurice that he was very conscious of the pangs of hunger himself, but it was difficult to see how the fact was to be brought home to the brigands. On testing the door by repeated knocks, he found that it was still blocked up on the outside, and he had nothing with which to reach the ceiling, and so disturb the floor of the room above. In these circumstances, the bright idea seized him of rolling about some of the empty jars, which made a most satisfactory noise, and presently the board was lifted again, and Milosch ordered the prisoners angrily to be quiet. When the state of things was explained, he deigned to parley, assuring them that it only wanted half an hour to sunset, and that as soon as it was twilight they should be released and bountifully fed, but that for the present they must keep absolute silence, if they valued their lives. The reason for this became apparent in the course of one of the longest half-hours they had ever spent, when the boards above rattled with the not very distant sound of regular tramping.

"That's Wylie and his army going home," said Maurice. "Fancy their being so close to us! I suppose we must have come back quite near the village we passed through last night. If the old chap only knew!"

The sound of the tramping died away, the dim religious light which filtered through the chinks between the boards vanished altogether, and they waited in darkness until there was a welcome noise at the door. The fodder which had concealed it was being flung away, and they were ordered to come out. Passing from the noisome stable, they were hurried through the yard into the house, and while room was made for Maurice in the jovial circle of brigands who occupied the stone divans in a large ground-floor room, deeply interested in the extensive cooking operations going on over and before an enormous fireplace, the girls were taken up into the tower they had already visited, and handed over to the women of the family. The grandmother and two or three elderly dependants were doing the cooking downstairs, where also were the men of the house, acting as more or less willing hosts to the brigands, but there were matrons and girls and children enough to make the household a puzzle in relationships. The women were shy at first, but when they saw by the rays of their primitive lamp the plight of their guests they forgot their timidity. They bathed and bound up their wounded feet, pressed upon them clean head-handkerchiefs and the loose embroidered shirts they themselves wore on feast-days, and brought them a plentiful supply of food. After the meal they made them comfortable with loose sheepskins upon the divans, and sat upon the floor to make conversation. The girls had picked up something of the language

by this time—Eirene helping herself out with Scythian words—and an abundant use of gesture helped towards mutual comprehension. The prisoners were able to indicate the names of their respective countries, the manner of their capture, and their wanderings since that event, while the women expressed their pity and sympathy, together with their unbiassed opinion of the brigands.

That was the first of five nights passed in the tower, the days being spent underground, and the curious relations of the brigands with the rural population became manifest. The peasant-farmer had the privilege of providing the brigand with food, clothes, shelter if he demanded it, and intelligence of the doings of the authorities, in return for which he received protection against rival bands, and was secured against wilful damage to his property, while the brigands winked at the prompt disappearance of every article of value from the house and from the dress of the women when a visit from them was expected. There was no love lost between protectors and protected, guests and hosts, for the women had much to say of the ruthless demands of the brigands for food and clothing when the family had barely enough for themselves, and laughed at their boast of plundering only the rich. Money they took from the rich alone, certainly, but if the poor man, who had no money, tried to hide his last sheep to save it from their clutches, he might be thankful if he escaped with his life. With all this, the family were discussing—with as little constraint as if the priesthood had been the career in question—whether the eldest son of one of its numerous branches should become a brigand instead of submitting to the vicissitudes of rural life. Brigandage was the best profession for an active young man, it was generally

agreed, and it was both a protection and a distinction to have a relation in a well-known band, but it gave the authorities a pretext for additional exactions, and if the long course of serving two masters should happen to end unfortunately, it was not desirable for the chief to have at hand a hostage for the conduct of the family. Not that the authorities could do much harm to a band like Stoyan's, declared the grandmother, who was the chief advocate of brigandage as a career, for Stoyan had his own agent, receiving a regular salary, among the underlings of the Vali himself, who sent him early news of any offensive action that might be contemplated. It was only when troublesome foreigners rushed things, as Wylie had done, that the arrangement broke down.

All these things Zoe stored up in her mind for Maurice's benefit, against the time when he should appear as the Michael who was to deliver Emathia from oppression on the one side and lawlessness on the other. It struck her as almost overpoweringly pathetic that when the women learned that her father and mother were both dead, they should ask, scarcely waiting for a reply, "The Roumis killed them, of course?" but the effect was spoilt when she discovered that they regarded the inhabitants of a Greek-speaking village near them with a hatred as rancorous as that which they cherished towards the Moslems whose name they never mentioned without a curse. It was the irony of fate that the last representatives of Greek ascendancy should be dependent on these fanatical Slavs for the commonest offices of kindness, but what hope was there of reconciling the divergent elements? "If one could spend a lifetime travelling about the country, and getting to know the people personally, there might be some chance," thought Zoe; "but even

if there was the time to spare, the jealousy of the Powers would prevent it." She was sitting on the divan, wearing the best clothes of one of the women, who was adding a border of brown homespun to the much-patched grey skirt, and the woman looked up and smiled at her. Eirene, who had refused any help rather abruptly, was sitting close to the lamp, mending her own skirt, having left Zoe to explain, with much futile gesticulation, that her sister was very independent, and would insist on doing everything for herself. "I wonder what would happen if I could make them understand who we are?" thought Zoe, but she did not try it.

The days in the underground dungeon were long and trying, for the absence of light prevented the girls from having recourse even to needlework, and much as they needed rest, they could not sleep all day as well as all night. On the second day they organised a mutual entertainment society, or rather Zoe did her part without being asked, and worried the others into doing theirs. She led off, and also filled up gaps, with a serial story of such length and complexity that there seemed no reason for it ever to come to an end, of which Maurice remarked ungratefully that he knew now why no publishers would have anything to do with her novels; they feared for their reason if they were once drawn into examining them. Eirene told Scythian folk-tales, gathered from her nurses in the very early years before she was afflicted with English, French, and German governesses simultaneously, and Maurice drew on his store of Cambridge stories, which was running very low before the imprisonment ended.

It was not until the sixth day after their night of wandering that they left the farm, and though the

Roumi troops had presumably quitted the district, they were conducted away with as much precaution as had been observed in reaching it. Zoe suggested that the brigands feared their eyes might suffer from the daylight after such a long deprivation of it, and that this was the reason for blindfolding them afresh, for they actually quitted the place without having seen it, or the faces of the inhabitants, by any but artificial light. The women expressed their condolence and pity loudly, and would have loaded them with more gifts of food and clothes than they could well carry, but the brigand chief interfered. They had a long march before them, he said, and no one was going to carry the prisoners' parcels for them. The gifts were therefore reduced to their smallest dimensions, and the start was made, each of the helpless captives walking between two of the brigands. To their relief, the track was neither so steep nor so rough as the one they had followed in reaching the farm, and after two hours' walking, their guards removed the handkerchiefs from their eyes. To their weakened sight, all appeared dark even then, and it was only by degrees they distinguished that they were in a thick forest, the trees arching over the narrow path on which they stood. They were allowed little time to accustom themselves to the half-light, for the march was continued at once, the trend of the path being uniformly upward, but the ascent fairly gradual. A brief rest at midday was welcomed by the girls, who were already flagging, much to the annoyance of the brigands, and a hasty consultation took place between Stoyan and his lieutenants. As a result, it was evidently decided not to attempt to push on as far as had been intended, for the pace was less severe when they started again, and the halt for the night

was called in a small clearing as early as four o'clock in the afternoon.

Adversity had done wonders in teaching the girls to bear their part in a backwoods life, and Maurice was no longer left to construct the usual hut by himself. He cut the poles and fixed them in the ground, but Zoe and Eirene twisted in and out the smaller branches which formed both roof and sides, and collected leaves and twigs for beds. Eirene was openly proud of her handiwork, but for Zoe it was associated with a regretful thought of Wylie. "What a lot of trouble we used to give him at first!" she mused; "and we never offered to do anything for ourselves. He must have thought us disgustingly helpless." The recollection that if Wylie had thought so, he had, at any rate, put a good face on the matter, afforded some comfort, and by a peculiar process of thought she derived consolation also from the reflection that on the whole it was better he should think so.

There were no kabobs to cook to-night, for the food brought from the farm supplied a plentiful supper, but the brigands lighted a fire for the sake of keeping off wild beasts and evil spirits, and sat round it in great contentment. The prisoners declined the offer of a fire of their own, and sat on the ground at the upper part of the clearing, luxuriously propped against tree trunks, to watch the sunset glow which pierced the black canopy of leaves and branches overhead. To Eirene it suggested similar sunsets seen through boughs of pine or birch on the great plains of Scythia, and as though the magic of the hour had unloosed her tongue, she began to talk of the long summer evenings, when there was scarcely any actual night, and she had donned peasant costume, and attended

by the governess who happened to be in favour at the moment, joined in the games and dances of the peasant girls on her father's estate. Maurice listened, fascinated, half by the suggestion of a new side to Eirene's character, half by the conviction that in any disguise she would still infallibly be a queen among subjects. If the subjects were recalcitrant, so much the worse for them. He drew her on by questions, laughed at her answers, and owned that he wished he had been there to take part in the revels—a suggestion which served to jar upon Zoe, who had been sitting silent.

"I do wish," she said, opening her eyes wearily, "you wouldn't disturb my meditations in this frivolous way. You forget the literary exigencies of the moment."

"What are they?" asked Maurice. "Is it particularly literary to go to sleep leaning against a tree?"

"I said I was meditating," was the severe answer. "You seem to forget that as all my note-books have been heartlessly reft from me, I have to store up all our experiences in my head."

"Ready for the book? Is it to be a plain tale—or a decorated one—or a novel?"

"Both," said Zoe decisively. "I find it would be a waste of good material to lavish it all on one. The plain tale of our adventures and sufferings will sell like wildfire, and pay for the novel, which will be all local colour. I shall keep all the choice bits of folklore and that sort of thing for it."

"I know you said once that people always skipped the local colour in reading a book," objected Eirene.

"How can they, if it's all local colour?"

"They needn't read the book," said Maurice.

"That's why I shall need the success of the plain

to pay for it," returned Zoe calmly. "I shall have a *succès d'estime* with the novel. And after that, I shall never have to trouble about local colour again all my life."

"I really believe," came in accents of considerable irritation from Eirene, "that you enjoy being imprisoned in underground dungeons, and climbing up and down these atrocious hills with your skirts in ribbons, and wearing horrid moccasins because you have no shoes, and being cursed and threatened if you stop to rest for a moment, just because you mean to put it into your books."

"No, I can't say that I enjoy it, certainly—but I can't help knowing how well it will look in the book."

"You are mad upon your books!" said Eirene tartly. "If it was painting, or music, or anything of that kind, I could understand it, but mere novel-writing!"

"Of course you can't understand it yet. Only wait until you have an object in life, and then you will."

"How can you say I have not an object in life? Am I not suffering for it at this very moment?"

"You might have the politeness to say that the suffering isn't so bad because we are here," suggested Zoe.

"Oh, I am not skilful in putting things politely. I am not literary!" with deep contempt.

"And don't you wish you were?" asked Maurice lazily.

"No, I am not like Zoe. She says that when she marries, the man must have fallen in love with her through reading her books."

"And none of them are written yet? Well, my future brother-in-law has plenty of time to spare," chuckled Maurice.

"Eirene, you are the very meanest——" began Zoe.

"Look here," said Maurice hastily, "you're both tired out, aren't you? I was sure the march was too much for you. Let us all meditate if you think it'll be restful. Or what do you think of turning in at once?"

"No," said Eirene, "it is not that we are tired, it is that we are both cross. I was cross because Zoe always seems to think that if she has described a thing in suitable language it is all right—and besides, she said I had no object in life. Why were you cross, Zoe?"

"I don't know—and," added Zoe with emphasis, "I never knew that telling people they were cross made them less so."

"But it's part of Eirene's system," said Maurice. "Don't you remember how we discussed it with Wylie quite a long time ago—her view that you ought never to mask disagreeable facts for the sake of other people's feelings?"

"And you were all against me!" sighed Eirene. Later on, when she and Zoe had rolled themselves up in their rugs for the night, she recurred to the question.

"Zoe, why were you so angry? You could hardly speak. Did I say anything very dreadful?"

Zoe turned upon her with flashing eyes. "A girl who will tell a man what another girl said to her in private isn't worthy the name of girl," she said tersely.

"But Maurice! I never thought——"

"Maurice is a man, and men don't understand. You seem to have had something left out of your composition, Eirene. You ought to know that sort of thing without thinking."

"I suppose it is because I had no brothers and

sisters and no friends of my own rank," said Eirene, in a choking voice. "I think I would make almost any sacrifice for you and Maurice, and yet I do these dreadful things without even knowing they are dreadful."

"Oh, don't cry!" entreated Zoe anxiously. "I suppose it isn't your fault, as you say. Lots of people would have an arm cut off for their relations, though they can't manage not to say nasty things to them."

"I would give up everything for you and Maurice—except my object in life," repeated Eirene.

"How funny it would be if you found yourself called upon to give up just that!" mused Zoe aloud, and then realised with a shock that she was approaching dangerous ground.

"What do you mean?" asked Eirene quickly. "How could I be obliged to give that up for you?" and Zoe embarked hastily upon a lame and rambling explanation.

"Why, you see, it struck me suddenly that some one might make you choose between giving up—your object, and having us killed. The sort of thing that happens in a book, don't you know? I don't know what made me think of it; I suppose it was my literary mind, which you dislike so much. I can't help it, I'm always like that. Whatever happens—or even little everyday things which are not happenings at all, simply chances for things to happen—my mind always jumps forward to the end, and I think of all sorts of developments, and they work themselves out on their own lines. You see, this situation is so full of possibilities——"

"But why that one? Why do you think of such fearful things?" moaned Eirene. Zoe, who hoped she had guided the conversation into the safe paths of literary disquisition, was obliged to begin again.

"Oh, it was only nonsense. How could such a thing happen? Whatever your object may be——"

"You shall judge," said Eirene. "I will tell it you."

"Oh, no!" cried Zoe, who was by no means anxious to find herself officially burdened with the secret she had discovered unaided. "Why, if there was no other reason, don't you see that it might be safer for Maurice and me to know nothing if we were questioned? I mean—you don't tell me what there is to be afraid of, but you seem to think there's something. Surely, as you have kept your mouth shut so long, you had better do it still?"

"I suppose so," agreed Eirene, with considerable hesitation. "But you understand—you know—that whatever happens, Maurice and you are my dear brother and sister, and nothing is to come between us?"

"If anything does, it won't be on our side," said Zoe heartily, and immediately wondered whether this was likely to be strictly true.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN EMISSARY.

"It's a church!" said Eirene, in tones of horror.

"Well, I suppose it was a church once, but it's only a ruin now," said Zoe. Another day of climbing had brought them out of the forest, and up to an isolated building standing on the saddle between two mountain-peaks, which they were informed was to be their dwelling for the present.

"But to live in it—it is sacrilege! And they say that we are to sleep behind the *ikonostasis*!"

"Well, I think it's rather nice of them. It has a roof, at any rate, and the rest of the church hasn't much."

"But it is the sanctuary, where no woman may even set foot! Let us tell them we refuse to enter."

"And sleep out in the open, I suppose? No, thank you. Why, Eirene, the brigands wouldn't do anything that they thought would make the saints angry, and they belong to the Greek Church! just as much as you do."

"They? They are miserable schismatics—followers of the upstart heretical church of Thracia, outcasts from Orthodoxy!" cried Eirene.

"Oh, do be quiet!" cried Zoe anxiously. "That new man whom Milosch brought with him to-day

may understand English. I saw him staring hard at you when you were kissing all those old worn-out saints on the screen."

"But what harm could it do if he did? These men know that they are schismatics."

"Yes, but it isn't natural that a Scythian girl should think them so. How will you account for your Greek sympathies?" A pause of horror, as Zoe realised what she had said, then she rallied her forces. "You know, the time for the ransom is getting so near now that I am feeling horribly nervous. How dreadful it would be if any of us did anything that made the brigands suspicious, so that they refused to let us go! Do be sensible, and let us be thankful we have this nice little place to ourselves."

"Well, I shall sit outside as long as I can," said Eirene obstinately. "I suppose I must come in when it gets dark, but I feel we shall deserve whatever may happen to us after this."

Undisturbed by these religious, or superstitious, fears, Zoe went on with the work of preparing the room, on the threshold of which Eirene had been standing, declining to enter. It was the chancel, or apse, of the ruined church, and the half-dome which formed its roof was still in place, together with the *ikonostasis*, or wooden screen painted with figures of saints, which separated it from the body of the building, though the plates of metal which had formerly represented haloes and details of clothing had been wrenched away. Beneath the steps which led up to the sanctuary from the church was an underground chamber, approached by a door and staircase on one side, and this was the only place where a fire could be made, lest the light or smoke should betray that the building was inhabited. The brigands were already



lighting the fire, and the smoke dispersed itself by way of the staircase into the church, and penetrated through the cracks of the screen into the sanctuary. It seemed curious that the wild bands which made the place one of their haunts had not torn down the screen for firewood, but apparently their sacrilegious impulses had stopped short after depriving the saints of their haloes. Zoe went to work methodically, spreading on the stone floor for beds the pine-branches Maurice had cut, and unrolling the rugs. Maurice would sleep on the threshold, on the broad topmost step, and Zoe felt an unusual sense of comfort and security in the fact that this bare little room was to be their own for some days. The end of the captivity was in sight—for she entertained not the smallest doubt of the success of Wylie's efforts—and from the ruined church they might hope to make their last journey as prisoners, to the spot where the ransom was to be paid.

Her work done, Zoe sat down to rest, too tired even to pass down the ruined nave and seek Eirene outside. Maurice was helping some of the brigands to cut firewood in the forest, Zeko and another man were in charge of the underground kitchen, and the rest were mending their moccasins or lounging idly in the church. It was not dark yet, and Zoe had accepted Eirene's decision as unshakable, so that it was with surprise she saw her coming up the steps, and entering the sanctuary without protest or hesitation. Her face was aglow with hope, and she threw herself down on the rug beside Zoe.

"Zoe," she whispered eagerly, "we have a friend. It is Vlasto, the man who came to-day with Milosch."

"But have you been talking to him all this time? Oh, Eirene, suppose he is a spy!"

"No, listen. I was sitting outside, when he came up the hill with a bundle of wood. He stumbled and nearly fell, and called out in Scythian—not in the mixed language the others speak. Then he recollected himself, and looked round to see whether any one had heard. I thought it was curious, and spoke to him in Scythian, and he told me Professor Panagiotis had sent him."

"The Professor? To Maurice?"

"No, to me. He guessed which I was when he saw me venerate the *ikons*, and the stumble and the exclamation in Scythian were meant to draw my attention."

"But how did the Professor know you were here?"

"I asked him that, but he did not seem to know—seemed to think that Professor Panagiotis had been expecting me as he had you, but I told him no. Then he said the Professor must have put two and two together when he heard I had disappeared, but he had not told him about it."

"I hope it's all right," murmured Zoe doubtfully.

"What could there be wrong about it? He said that he was to warn me of a plan the Professor hoped to carry out—and that I should not go down to Therma with you when we are released, lest I should be recognised by some one belonging to the Scythian colony. But I refused to contemplate such a thing. I said I would not be separated from my faithful friends until we were all in safety."

"Eirene, I don't believe the man came from Professor Panagiotis at all!" cried Zoe. "I can't imagine the Professor would choose a messenger who talked Scythian, and why should he send him to you instead of to us?"

The question in her mind was, naturally, whether

the Professor could have changed his mind and be playing Maurice false, but to Eirene her doubt seemed the outcome of self-esteem wounded by an apparent slight.

"I must really explain things to you, Zoe," she said, with a gentleness which she did not intend to be patronising. "I am Eirene Nicolaievna Féofan, and the Professor is intrusted with the honourable task of restoring to me the throne of my imperial ancestors."

"Oh dear, yes, I know that," said Zoe impatiently; "but why should he do such a foolish thing as to send messages about it to you now?"

"You knew?" gasped Eirene. "How?"

"Oh, the Professor had told us about you, and it came to me suddenly. You see, you fitted in with all that I knew of Eirene Féofan, and of nobody else."

"Does Maurice know?"

"No, I'm sure he doesn't, and there's no reason why he should. Let us keep it to ourselves."

"I particularly wish Maurice to be told," said Eirene decisively. "If you won't do it, I must."

"Oh, I will," cried Zoe quickly.

"Very well, then; as soon as possible, please. I am glad to put things on a right footing at last. If I had known and trusted you as I do now when we first met, I should have told you then, as I ought."

"Good gracious, Eirene, don't talk as if you were suddenly removed miles above us! We are ourselves, and you are yourself, just as before. I can promise you that your wonderful news won't make any difference to us, and I have respect enough for your character to trust that it won't to you."

Eirene smiled in a puzzled way. "Perhaps you would have preferred me to follow the Professor's advice, and say nothing to you?" she said.

"Did he tell you to say nothing to us?"

"That was his message by Vlasto, that I was not to reveal this scheme of his to you."

"And you go and do it at once?"

"Professor Panagiotis has no control over my actions," said Eirene, with dignity. "He may tender his advice, but it is for me to accept or reject it as I think well."

"What could have been his reason?" mused Zoe.

"He also asked whether I had told you who I was, and entreated me to keep the secret if I had not. It made me feel that I was not treating you fairly—that a peasant should know what my trusted companions had not been told."

"Did he cross-question you any more?" asked Zoe, too anxious to care much about Eirene's mental perplexities.

"He was very eager to know whether all the family jewels I took with me when I escaped were hopelessly lost. It seems that the ruby *plaque de corsage* was exposed for sale in Therma, and has since been destroyed—the one with the wings, you know. That made me very sad for a moment, but I was able to assure him that I had saved the most important of all."

It was dark now, but she took Zoe's hand and guided it over her skirt. "The girdle of the Empress Isidora," she said, as Zoe's fingers came in contact with something round and hard, once, again, some dozen times in all.

"Eirene, the weights you put in your skirt! you have had them there all this time? That was the reason you would never let any one touch it!" cried Zoe.

"Yes, I sewed them in that day when I made you go out for a walk at Przlepka. Doesn't it seem a

long time ago? I dared not hide them in my pockets. The girdle is ~~the~~ most precious thing in the world. It has been handed down in secret in my father's family since the fall of Czarigrad."

"But, Eirene, you had it—on you—when you told the brigands you had given up everything, and you let Captain Wylie swear that you had? He believed what you said."

Eirene's face showed perplexity. "Yes," she said, "I know. Sometimes I have wished that I had not done it, when I saw how you and Maurice thought of such things. But then I remembered that I could not possibly have let it go, so I felt that there was nothing else to be done."

"You are not really sorry," said Zoe with severity. "If you were, I suppose you would give it up to the brigands now."

"That is quite impossible," said Eirene calmly.

"Well, you must have a funny sort of conscience. You are afraid something will happen to you because you have to sleep in a church, and yet you tell a deliberate lie without a qualm."

"We need not have slept in the church. The other could not be avoided," said Eirene.

"Well, I expect the something has happened already, through your talking to Vlasto. I feel more and more certain he is a spy, and no doubt he will manage to get the girdle from you somehow. Milosch is quite capable of having told him what to say."

"But how should Milosch know who I am?"

"By putting two and two together, I suppose, like the Professor. Oh, Eirene, if you have kept us from being set free next week, I shall never—— Well, do you think that we could ever forgive you?"

"But it would be as bad for me."

"I don't know—perhaps not." Eirene looked at her in wonder. "At any rate, you ~~would~~ have only yourself to blame."

"Here is Maurice," said Eirene. "Now remember."

Very unwillingly Zoe obeyed her instructions, and succeeded in catching Maurice by himself the next morning.

"Eirene is particularly anxious that I should tell you something," she said. "She is Eirene Féofan, the girl the Professor told us about, our very distant cousin, and the next heir after you and me."

Maurice sat in stupefied silence for a moment. "Did you ever?" he remarked slowly at last. "To think that we have had her with us all this time without finding it out!"

"I found it out long ago," said Zoe calmly.

"No, really? How?"

"Why, of course, I had been trying to place her ever since we first met. It was clear she came from Scythia, but I didn't think she could belong to the Imperial family, for how could she have got away, and why should she be wandering about on a solitary mission? Then, one evening, in the cave, we were talking, do you remember? and it came out that she knew the Professor, and that she sympathised with the Greeks against the Slavs, and that she was expecting a kingdom in her own right. She simply couldn't be any one but Eirene Féofan."

"But I heard it all, and never twigged."

"Oh, you were thinking of other things—of Eirene herself, and of ameliorating the lot of the brigands. I nearly exploded when she accused us of trying to find out who she was, and you declared so indignantly that we were doing nothing of the kind. It was after I had asked her a leading question."

Maurice frowned. "Well, I suppose you have told her who we ~~are~~?" he said.

"Certainly not, and I am not going to."

"Then I ~~shall~~."

"No, you won't. It wouldn't ~~be~~ safe. You know what Eirene is—or, rather, you can't tell what she will do. Only yesterday afternoon she made a confidant of that new brigand, Vlasto, and told him everything she could tell, just because he said he had been sent to her by Professor Panagiotis."

"That's just it. If she knew about us, she would realise that the Professor wouldn't send to her. It isn't fair, Zoe. It's placing her under a disadvantage for us to know her secret while she doesn't know ours."

"Why, what difference would it make if she did?"

Maurice appeared to find a difficulty in answering. "Well, I should think she'd be rather pleased," he said, after some hesitation, "to find that we were her equals and relations and that sort of thing, don't you know?"

"My dear boy!" with superb scorn. "Do you know Eirene as little as that after all this time? Do you really think she would welcome us as relations and equals? You seem to forget that we stand for the ruin of all her schemes. She is simply not wanted if you are recognised as the heir."

"Oh, I say, but this is vile!" cried Maurice. "To go and rob a poor girl of what she has always looked forward to as her own——! Look here, Zoe, let's chuck it."

"You forget the Professor," said Zoe.

"Oh, blow the Professor! What did he mean by mixing things up in this way? Why couldn't he have left Eirene alone, instead of feeding her up with

the thought that she was the heir, and then bringing her here only to disappoint her? You don't seem to see what a low business it is, or how much worse it makes it that we have got to know her and find out what it means to her."

"I can quite see why the Professor might have brought her into contact with us, but unfortunately he didn't. As far as I can make out, he dropped her father finally because he would do nothing but shilly-shally instead of taking action, but the father was indiscreet enough to let Eirene know about the offers that had been made him. She takes action on her own account, in a way which would have been most embarrassing for the poor Professor but for the railway accident. In the meantime he has found you, and thinks no more about Eirene. But if the train had reached Therma all right, we should probably have separated at the station only to meet upon the Professor's doorstep, and he would have had to decide point-blank between his rival candidates."

"You seem to be enjoying the whole thing," said Maurice indignantly. "It doesn't occur to you how much more it is to Eirene than to us. We have only to go home again if the thing doesn't come off, but it's everything to her. She has cut herself off entirely from her friends and everybody in Scythia, and she has no money, and even her jewellery is gone. What is she to do?"

"It all depends on whether you care more for Eirene's feelings or for what you felt to be your duty when we started," said Zoe. "You have heard her talk; you can imagine what sort of ruler she would make if any possible concurrence of disasters drove the Powers in desperation to revive the Empire for her. You know, too, the lines on which you would

work if the task fell to you. Besides, it's not a question of feeling, but of right."

"I always heard that women were hard on women, but I didn't think you were like that."

Zoe restrained her anger with an effort. "My dear Maurice," she said impatiently, "you compel me to remind you that there is one very simple and obvious way of reconciling your rights and Eirene's. It is still open to you."

"What are you suggesting?" demanded Maurice.

"I suggest nothing," Zoe replied, with a wooden face.

"You are suggesting that I should be a cad."

"Then I will add the further suggestion that you should not be an idiot," said Zoe, thoroughly roused. "I merely want you to leave things as they are until we get to Therma. Then you can do as you like, and I fail to see where the caddishness comes in. But if we tell Eirene who we are now, she will simply regard us as impostors, and she will be utterly unmanageable. I have a stake in the matter as well as you, and I absolutely refuse to allow you to tell her. I own I do put a little value on my life."

"I beg your pardon. I thought you meant that I was to try and make sure of her now, when she has no one else to turn to, and can't get away from us."

"Why will men always read detestable meanings into the simplest advice?" cried Zoe, still angry; then, softening, "Dear boy, do be sensible. What chance do you think you would have with Eirene as things are? Wait until she knows the truth, and can realise that it is not quite a case of Queen Cophetua and a beggar-man. But don't risk all our lives, just when we are within a week of safety, by giving her the idea that you are either an impostor or a dangerous rival. I

don't suppose for a moment that she would mean to harm you, but she acts on impulse, and that makes her do all sorts of things. Why—I didn't mean to tell you, because it seems to reflect on her—but she actually told this man Vlasto that she has carried about with her a priceless Byzantine girdle all this time, sewn up in pieces in her skirt."

"But I thought she gave up everything when we were captured?" said Maurice.

"She said she did," said Zoe reluctantly. "We were discussing whether she ought not to give it up to the brigands now. What do you think?"

"Oh, nonsense! It isn't as if it belonged to the brigands," said Maurice contemptuously. "But," he changed the subject with an effort, "what about this man Vlasto? Why should he address himself to her?"

"That's exactly what makes me think he doesn't come from the Professor at all," cried Zoe. "He evidently thought the Professor knew she was coming to Therma, and brought her a message based on that, but the Professor had no idea of her journey, or that she was with us."

"Did she tell you what the message was?"

"It was to try to get her to separate from us when we are ransomed—on the plea that she might be recognised in Therma. Happily, she refused, but—Maurice, you know it was Milosch who brought this man here. We thought, when we saw he was not with the band the day before yesterday, that he had gone to meet some members of his Committee, and get fresh orders. Suppose it was a Scythian agent he went to meet, and that Scythia had got the idea that Eirene might be here with us, and sent Vlasto to make sure? She has given everything away."

"We mustn't be seeing Scythians in every bush,"

said Maurice gloomily, "but it looks bad. What can they want to get her away from us for? It can't mean any good to her. Zoe, will you do your level best to keep her firm in sticking to us? You see, she is practically an outlaw, having cut herself off from Scythian protection, but if anything happened to you or me the matter would be looked into."

"I will. And you won't make any attempt to tell her who we are?"

"No. I see that it's better not to disturb her mind."

CHAPTER XV.

THE GIRDLE OF ISIDORA.

"It's a dog's life!" said Zeko, leaning against one of the columns of the deserted church, and rolling a cigarette.

"I should have thought you had rather a good time, on the whole," said Maurice, who was sitting on the steps below the *ikonostasis*. The girls sat on the top step behind him, looking out through the ruined west doorway, the lower part of which was blocked by the remains of the narthex. Rain was falling heavily, and they could not go out, but between the battered columns they could see the wild mountain landscape like a picture in a frame. Most of the brigands were luxuriating in the warmth of the underground kitchen, but the chief, with Milosch and Vlasto, had gone out into the rain some time before, and Zeko and one other were keeping an eye upon the prisoners.

"A good time!" repeated Zeko scornfully. "It's hard work, and constant danger, and no comfort, and what does it lead to? Sometimes we pull off a good thing, as when we got hold of you, but what good will it do us? The Committee will take nearly all the money; it isn't as if we could retire and settle down upon what we do get. It's all very well to swagger through a village with your belt full of weapons, with

all the girls pointing at you, and whispering, 'There goes the valiant Zeko of Stoyan's band,' and all the lads wanting to join you, but it's different when you come to the village, frozen and starving, on a winter's night, and want food and shelter. The people dare not refuse you, but you can see their black looks, and you know they are cursing you under their breath. We say we don't rob the poor, but they know, and we know, that our bags must be filled with bread, though the children go hungry, and we must have greatcoats, if we take them from the old grandfathers. Then if the Vali gets to know of our being in the neighbourhood, and wishes to get a good name for activity with the foreign consuls, he doesn't go after us, but down he comes on the poor souls who have fed us, and robs them of what we have left them. And they don't venture to denounce, much less betray us, for they are more afraid of us than him."

"But if you are so sorry for the people, why expose them to all this?" asked Maurice.

Zeko shrugged his shoulders, "We must live," he said. "And our own relations are supporting other bands in our own villages in the same way. We don't remain in our own neighbourhood, for it would make it too easy for the Vali. He could destroy our village if he wanted to be revenged on us. But since we all come from different villages, and work at long distances from our homes, he knows it would do no good to destroy any particular village. Of course, it means that we can only visit our own people by stealth, and with great precautions, perhaps at intervals of many months."

"But if the life is so hard, why go on with it?" persisted Maurice.

"What else is there to do? There are the taxes,

and the troubles with the police, and the blood-feuds—all the different reasons that made us take to the hills; how can we go back to them? All you rich people who grind the faces of the poor shriek loud enough when we make you taste a little of what our life is, but you drive us to it. Perhaps you will pity us a little now that you have tried what hunger and cold and hardship really are."

"I pitied you long before I came to Emathia," said Maurice, "but I pity you less now. Your misfortunes are so much your own fault. United, you Emathian Christians might have wrung concessions, even self-government, from Roum, and extorted the respect of Europe, but you have made yourselves a byword by your dissensions. Village fights village, and one side of a street the other side. When you should be all banded together against the Roumis, you Illyrians and Thracians and Dardanians are murdering Greeks, and the Greeks are preparing for revenge. Christian hates Christian worse than Roumi."

"Of course," said Zeko, with entire acquiescence. "Are not the Patriarchists—curse them to the lowest depths of hell!"—he spat on the ground—"worse than the Roumis? If we could get rid of them we should have no more trouble."

"And so you waste and weaken your strength in fighting one another!" said Maurice. "I tell you, if I were your leader, I would not trouble about the Roumis, but I would put down with an iron hand these feuds among Christians."

He had spoken with more earnestness than he realised, and the brigands laughed, while Zoe thought of the youthful Pompey in the pirate stronghold, and Eirene frowned, not approving of this imaginary encroachment upon her rights. Before any one had

taken the trouble to controvert Maurice's absurd theories, the talk was interrupted. The chief and Milosch came up the church, and Stoyan, with a lowering brow, gripped Eirene by the shoulder.

"Is it true that you still have jewels concealed about you, though you declared you had given up everything?" he demanded.

Eirene had turned pale, but she answered boldly, "Yes."

"And you were aware of this?" asked the chief of Maurice.

"I did not know——" began Maurice. Then he changed the form of his sentence. "Yes, I know."

"Don't hold me," said Eirene. "I will give it up."

"No, you are welcome to it. I hear it brings ill-luck. It has done so already to you. Keep it, and its ill-luck with it."

Zeko and his companion, who had begun to murmur, were appeased on hearing this, and withdrew to discuss the matter with their comrades, while the chief and Milosch strode out again. Zoe grasped Maurice's arm and drew him aside.

"Why didn't you say you had no idea of it?" she asked indignantly.

"How could I give her away? It sounds so insane of her to have tried to deceive even us."

"You think only of her. Don't you see they believe that Captain Wylie knew, and deliberately took a false oath?"

"Oh, nonsense! how could they? But I don't quite see what I could do now, anyhow. They wouldn't believe me if I explained."

"No, you have done the mischief—you and Eirene between you," said Zoe bitterly. "I suppose you will both be convinced now that Vlasto was a spy?"

No further reference was made to the matter, for Eirene, realising what she had done, shrank painfully from any approach to it, but the prisoners found themselves regarded with deep suspicion. They were not allowed to move outside the church unescorted, or to enter the forest at all, and two additional sentries, with rifles which they loaded ostentatiously, kept guard on the sanctuary steps at night, one on each side of Maurice. Zeko and one or two others, who had shown some approach to friendliness, now scowled whenever their eyes fell on the captives, and most ominous of all, Milosch went about bubbling over with malicious and irrepressible glee. Thus a week went by, until it was the day before that appointed for the ransom and the release. Once more the prisoners were ordered to collect their belongings for a march, and they obeyed with fast-beating hearts. Was freedom before them at last?

Leaving the ruined church, they spent the morning on the rugged tracks to which they were now becoming accustomed, climbing up and down and winding round mountain-shoulders in a seemingly purposeless way. At noon they sheltered in a cave, while two of the brigands went on, apparently to spy out the land. About an hour later these men returned, in a state of great excitement, and much talking and discussion ensued. Finally Stoyan vouchsafed to tell the prisoners that they would not march again until dark, and this for a sufficiently disquieting reason. By the road they had been taking it was necessary to pass through the district terrorised by a rival chief, of the name of Kayo, and his band, and it had only been chosen because it was the nearest way, and because Kayo was believed to be busy besieging a recalcitrant Greek notable at the farther end of his territory. But it

appeared that he had become aware of the fact that the ransom was about to be paid, and he was on the watch for Stoyan and his band, intending either to capture the prisoners from him, and secure the money for himself, or at least to enforce a division of the spoil. It was necessary, therefore, to turn back and take a more roundabout way, which would occupy at least two days more than the other. In spite of his bitter disappointment, Maurice could not but realise the reasonableness of Stoyan's contention that if there was a fight between the two bands, the girls were very likely to come off badly, while they would not suffer from the extra journey, since he had succeeded in procuring horses for them. Maurice suggested that Wylie would be made very anxious by the non-appearance of his friends, but received the assurance that a message would be despatched to him through the country people, and that he need not pay over the ransom until he was satisfied. The girls resigned themselves to the inevitable, when Maurice brought them the news, with as good grace as they could, and rested during the afternoon in preparation for the night journey, having learnt, among other things, to utilise every opportunity for repose that offered itself while on the march.

At dusk the two men stole out again and brought back the horses, or rather ponies, and as soon as the girls were mounted the party set out, proceeding at first very slowly, and with intense caution. By the time the moon rose they were far enough from Kayo's boundaries to be able to move on at a good pace, though the track was so narrow, and the precipices so steep, that the girls found it more comfortable to shut their eyes, and leave the guidance of their steeds to the brigands who led them. They were tired and

thoroughly chilled when the moonlight began to fail them, and welcomed the decision of Stoyan that he could not find the way in this unfamiliar region in the dark. A halt was called on a shelf of rock—a mere widening of the track—and the girls lay down on their rugs on the inner side, sheltered by the horses from the biting wind, and Maurice and the brigands on the track itself. Hard rock and sharp stones vied with the cold in making their resting-place uncomfortable, but they succeeded in getting a little sleep, and were ready to go on in the morning. It was now necessary, they were told, for them to be blindfolded again, as they were about to pass through a passage in the mountains which the brigands were all pledged not to show to any eyes but their own, and to this they submitted. But when Milosch produced a cake of beeswax from his bag, and ordered them to stop their ears as well, they rebelled.

"We spare you fright," he asserted. "Zere is Roumi garrison in front. If you hear ze drum, you scream, and zat betray us all. Wiz ears obstructed, you hear nossing."

"We shan't scream," declared Zoe indignantly. "We won't make a sound, whatever we hear."

Milosch appealed to the chief, who pondered the matter gloomily.

"We owe you no consideration," he grumbled. "For a whole month we have clothed and fed you, and provided you with shelter while we lay in the cold, and you have been deceiving us the whole time. For your sakes we have been hunted from our usual haunts, have made forced marches, and wandered about whole nights. You have no gratitude. If you see a chance of betraying us to the Roumis, you will do it."

"We are not such fools," said Maurice. "If it

came to a fight we should be the first to suffer, as you said yesterday. We have promised not to try to escape, and we don't mean to."

"What are your promises worth?" sneered Stoyan; but nothing more was said about the wax, and the girls rode on in darkness, Maurice being led between them. They had been marching about two hours when a sudden tension made itself felt among the brigands. Rifles were cocked, and there were excited whispers. The horses were turned and made to stand across the road, with their tails to the rock, and Maurice was placed between them and ordered to hold the bridles of both, while all the brigands apparently went forward to reconnoitre. It was some time before the soft pad of moccasined feet announced their return. Milosch's voice said, in a strident whisper, "Utter not one single word, or ze price is death." The bridles were taken from Maurice's hands, he felt a man on each side of him as before, and the march was resumed. It was continued, still in absolute silence, for hours, until the girls were nearly dropping from their horses with fatigue; but at last those in front stopped, and the handkerchief was removed from Maurice's eyes. He stared about him in astonishment. They had halted in a stony valley, with towering peaks all round it, and the sun was nearing its setting. A number of men were standing round, leaning on their rifles, but they wore rough brown clothes instead of the dirty kilts and long leggings of Stoyan and his band. There was not a familiar face to be seen. As if by magic, an entirely new set of brigands had taken the place of the old.

"Do help us down, Maurice," said Zoe, rather impatiently. "I am too stiff to move," and he complied mechanically. But while he fumbled with the knot

of the handkerchief which covered her eyes, he tried to prepare her.

"Zoe—Eirene—there's something wrong. None of our brigands are here. These are all strangers."

"Our brigands? How funny to call them that!" said Eirene, twisting off the handkerchief for herself. "Oh!" and she and Zoe stared blankly at their new companions.

"Ask them what it means, Maurice," said Zoe, in a rather shaky voice, and Maurice obeyed. But the strangers proved, or pretended, to be ignorant of all the languages which their prisoners could muster among them, though they talked to one another in an unknown tongue which Eirene thought must be Mœsian. They declined also to understand, or at any rate to answer, questions asked by means of signs, though when Maurice pointed the way they had come, and signified that he and the girls wished to go back, they quickly barred his progress, patting their rifles meaningly. Baffled and worn out, the prisoners sat down, whereupon the chief of the new brigands smiled upon them approvingly, and pointed to the preparations which were being made for the night. A pole was thrust into a crevice of the rock, and a long piece of rough canvas hung over it and pegged down at each side to form a tent, a second piece, fastened to the projecting end of the pole, serving as a curtain. Maurice advised the girls to take possession, and the chief beamed approval. A fire had been kindled, and food of some kind was cooking in a large pot, watched eagerly by the brigands. There was the usual deficiency of plates, but the captives were accommodated with their share in the lid, while their guards ate out of the pot, and as, like them, they now each possessed a wooden spoon, given them by the women at the

farm, they found no difficulty in making a meal. The fare was a kind of hasty-pudding, made of flour boiled with grape-treacle, very sweet and sticky, and eminently satisfying. The girls had soon had enough, and then came the moment Maurice had been dreading. He advised them to go to bed as soon as they had finished, but neither of them stirred.

"Maurice, what does it mean? We must know," said Zoe. "Has Kayo's band got hold of us after all?"

"How could they, without a fight? One can't believe that Stoyan and all his men were wiped out without a shot or a cry. No, I'm afraid it is that Stoyan has handed us over to some other band."

"And where are they taking us?" asked Eirene harshly.

Maurice hesitated, then decided that it was no use to attempt concealment. "As far as I can tell, we ought to have gone south-east to get to Therma," he said, "but we seemed to be going south-west, in the direction of the Morean frontier."

"And no one will know! Perhaps we shall never be rescued," said Zoe, with quivering lips.

"And it is all my fault!" cried Eirene. "I have brought you into this trouble, and I can do nothing."

"Oh, don't!" said Zoe hastily, forcing back her own tears when she saw Eirene's. "We have been in worse troubles than this, and have got through. It's—it's just that everything seemed to be all right; and now we have to begin it all over again. And we're tired, too. We shall look at these things more cheerfully in the morning."

If the girls cried themselves to sleep that night, Maurice was not to know it, and in the morning they were almost ostentatiously cheerful, though the line of march still led away from Therma and towards

the unknown. The character of the mountains was changing. The familiar sloping hillsides and tapering peaks were giving place to perpendicular or even overhanging cliffs, and stupendous pillars of rock towering in isolated masses.

"It's like being at the bottom of a cañon," said Zoe, late in the afternoon, looking up at the walls of rock. "How curiously it widens in front, Maurice! And there is another of those rock columns. Why, there is a little house at the very top! How do they get up? No, it is a big one—a castle."

"It must be a rock monastery," said Maurice, "though I didn't know there were any in Emathia."

They gazed up into the sky, where the monastery of Hadgi-Antoniou stood on its pillar like a bud at the end of a long stalk.

The day before, Wylie, with his friend Armitage, the artist, who had insisted on being present at the release of the captives, had made his way to the spot agreed upon, convoying the ransom, carefully packed and carried on donkeyback. The rendezvous was a wayside inn, or *han*, of doubtful character, providing the same accommodation for man as for beast, and little enough for either. The brigands had stipulated that no soldiers or armed men of any kind were to escort the treasure, and for this reason Wylie and Armitage were obliged to come alone, even the donkey-drivers declining the last stage, lest they should find themselves marked men in future. Before they would embark on the adventure at all, they had insisted that the value of their beasts, liberally calculated, should be deposited with the British Consul-General, and they were therefore quite at their ease in the more attractive *han* where they remained. Wylie had indulged



in a faint hope that he might be able to pay over the ransom at once, receive back his friends, and carry them off the same day to these more desirable quarters, where he had left a large collection of clothes and other comforts, contributed by Madame Panagiotis, the ladies at the British Consulate, and other sympathisers; but when he suggested this to the ill-favoured landlord of the brigands' inn, the man only laughed at him. Did the Capitan Bey really expect the band to be waiting to receive him, without making sure that he had kept his word and brought no soldiers? he asked. He himself was to send word to a point farther on in the mountains that the ransom had arrived, and from thence notice would be sent to the brigands, who would scour the neighbourhood before trusting themselves in the vicinity of the inn. Wylie set his teeth doggedly. He had not sacrificed everything to raise the ransom that it might be stolen from him now, and he and Armitage carried in the boxes of gold with their own hands, and spread their carpet over them. All night they relieved each other, one sleeping above the treasure while the other, armed with sword and revolver, kept watch.

The early part of the next day passed wearily, for they durst not leave the boxes unguarded; but at last the innkeeper announced that Stoyan was awaiting them at the point he had mentioned, and they loaded the donkeys again and followed him. Stoyan and Milosch came forward to meet them on the outskirts of a small wood, and led the way to a clearing in the middle of it. No one else was officially present, but Wylie was persuaded that the bushes had eyes, and that rifle-barrels protruded through the underwood. The boxes were lifted down, the gold counted and tested, and the chief announced that he was satisfied.

"Then where are our friends?" asked Wylie.

"They are already released," was the answer.

"But why? I thought they were to be given up to us here?"

"Ah, we know the Capitan of old, that he baits traps for us," smiled Stoyan. "If he had his friends safe, what should prevent him from calling forward soldiers to seize us before we could escape with the gold? Therefore he will not meet his friends while he is in our district. They are already on the way to Therma, and he can catch them up."

"But why release them before the ransom was paid?"

"It was promised, and we know that an Englishman always keeps his word. It is so, is it not? An Englishman's word is never broken?"

"Never. But who is with them?" asked Wylie, puzzled and uneasy, he knew not why.

"None of us. We despatched them alone, the two women riding on horses. Hasten after them, lest some other harm befall them. See!" He whistled, and brigands rose out of every bush, like the clansmen of Roderick Dhu. "We are all here. The Capitan can count the whole band."

Wylie counted, and found none absent, and he and Armitage withdrew, awkwardly enough. As they reached the inn, a peasant who was talking to the landlord turned and looked at them.

"You are the person for whom I had a message," he said. "I met a man and two women riding towards Therma, and they bade me watch for a European gentleman with blue eyes, and tell him that they would reach the city first."

Wylie flung the man a coin, and shouting to Armitage to pay the reckoning, rushed indoors to fetch

their belongings. These were soon piled upon the donkeys, and they set out, Wylie keeping the cavalcade moving at a smart pace, for the desire to see his friends again was heightened by the anxiety inspired by Stoyan's words. As they hurried on, a voice hailed them suddenly from the mountain-side, and, looking up, they saw Milosch standing on a jutting crag.

"When you not find zat you seek," he cried, "remember ze perjured oass!"

"What in the world is a perjured oass?" said Armitage. "Does he mean oaf?" with vague reminiscences of Kipling.

"From what I know of the gentleman, I should say he meant a broken oath," said Wylie. "But I don't know of any broken oath, unless they've broken theirs. Come on."

CHAPTER XVI.

HAGIOS ANTONIOS.

THE monastery of Hadgi-Antoniou towered aloft on its rocky pillar, and the prisoners and their guards stood below looking up at it, for there was no apparent means of reaching the top. Here and there ladders were visible on the face of the rock, but they ceased in the most capricious way at the points of greatest danger, and the lowest was something like a hundred and fifty feet above the ground. But the brigands did not share the perplexity of their captives, and two or three of them fired off their rifles. This was evidently the recognised way of attracting the attention of the inhabitants, for two heads, with long beards and high square caps, appeared far above against the sky, and a few words were exchanged, after which a rope, with something fastened to the end, seemed to come crawling down the rock from a projecting tower.

"Oh, Maurice, what is going to happen?" whispered Zoe, gazing fascinated at the slowly moving rope.

"I suppose they will draw us up one by one," he answered.

"One by one? Then we shall be separated," said Eirene fearfully.

"I hope not, but in any case, let us make a compact together that none of us will come to any decision, or

enter into any promise, without the other two. If they try to work upon ~~us~~ separately, let us each demand to be confronted with the others. It's our ~~only~~ chance."

The girls ~~promised~~ ~~hastily~~, eyeing ~~the~~ parcel at the end of ~~the~~ rope, which had now reached the ground, and revealed itself as a large net, attached by its four corners to a stout hook. The brigands unhooked the corners, and laying the net flat, made signs to the prisoners.

"Have we to go up in that?" said Zoe, turning white.

"I had better go first," said Maurice. "Then you'll see what it's like."

Eirene uttered an inarticulate protest, but he sat down on the net, the corners were gathered together and hooked above his head, and he was slowly raised from the ground. The girls watched the ascent with panting breath and a sick feeling of horror, for the rope moved jerkily, and at each jerk the net swung backwards and forwards, now sending Maurice against the rock, from which he was obliged to ward himself off with his hands, and now out into mid-air. It seemed to them that they had given him up for lost a hundred times before the net was grasped by sturdy hands and hauled into the tower, and they discovered that they were standing with their arms round one another, locked in a tight grip. A voice shouted something from the tower as the rope began to descend again, and almost before they had realised that one of them must make the journey next, the brigand chief was spreading out the net, and indicating that they might go up together. But Maurice's voice ~~called~~ from above, "Not both at once. The rope isn't strong enough," and Zoe pushed Eirene forward. "You next," she said, and immediately, after her usual fashion, began to wonder whether she had really

chosen the harder part for herself in watching a second ascent, or had merely deprived Eirene of the encouragement of example.

Eirene's journey was much less exciting than Maurice's, and Zoe guessed that her brother was exercising a guiding influence on the rope, for the terrifying oscillations had almost ceased. Be that as it might, the ascent was sufficiently awful, and Zoe wished vigorously that she had not possessed such good sight. Looking resolutely upwards, when it was her turn to be enclosed in the net, she saw, with a thrill of horror, that the rope, which cut the clear sky like a black line, was old and frayed, reduced in some places, as she persuaded herself, almost to a single strand. Looking down gave her no comfort, for the ground seemed immeasurably distant, and the swinging motion, slight as it now was, made her giddy, so that at last she shut her eyes, and kept them closed until she felt herself seized and dragged roughly sideways, then deposited upon some sort of floor, and the net unhooked.

"Come, Zoe, it's safely over, and you're all right," said Maurice, as she sat trembling in every limb and unable to move. "They want to send the net down for our things."

"The rope, Maurice—it's breaking!" she managed to articulate, grasping his arm to help herself up.

"Oh, you noticed that, did you? That was why I wouldn't let you come up together. But one of the monks who speaks Thracian says that they often draw ~~up two~~ men at once, and nothing has ever happened yet. The rope is only in its fourth year now, and it's due to last for six."

"I hope I shan't have to go up by it in its sixth year," said Zoe, forcing a smile. "Where's Eirene?"

"In a state of collapse inside somewhere, being looked after by the grandmother of all old women. Pull yourself together, Zoe. I think she wants you. And we might as well get out of the way of these reverend gentlemen."

There was little ~~upon~~ in the tower for anything but the ~~red~~ capstan or windlass which worked the rope and the monks who pushed at its bars, and Zoe tottered out with the help of Maurice's arm, to find herself in a stone-paved court, with Eirene lying on the stones in a dead faint, and an old woman wailing over her, while a group of monks wavered at a discreet distance, alternately drawn by curiosity and withheld by the consciousness that they ought not to be present.

"I say, what's this?" cried Maurice. "She wasn't fainting just now—only rather shaky. Look here, Zoe, can't you do anything? What's the proper thing—brandy?"

"Water," answered Zoe reprovingly, and Maurice shouted for water in English, Latin, Greek, French, and Thracian. It was the French that proved effectual at last, for one of the monks understood sufficiently to summon another old woman with a water-jar.

"Oh, Zoe, you are here!" gasped Eirene, when she opened her eyes. "Stay with me. Don't let them take me away. I won't be separated from you and Maurice."

The French-speaking monk approached Maurice softly. "Pray reassure her Royal Highness," he entreated. "We have prepared for her the best accommodation in our power, and if she desires to be attended by the other young woman, there is no difficulty. She is to enjoy every indulgence suited to her rank, if it is not inconsistent with her safety."

Much puzzled, Maurice conveyed the desired assurance to Eirene, who took in its significance at once, and inquired sharply how he was to be treated, in reply to which the monk declared that he would be the guest of the monastery. Satisfied with this answer, Eirene asked to be shown her room, to which she and Zoe were conducted by one of the officials of the monastery and the two old women. It was a large, low chamber, opening from a corridor, with a stone floor, and stone divans all round it, above which was a decoration of light arcading in plaster. There was a large fireplace projecting into the room, with a hearth piled with logs, and three windows, all innocent of glass, but provided with shutters. From two of these windows views of the surrounding country far below could be obtained; the other looked out on a smaller courtyard and across to another of the curiously irregular buildings which occupied the summit of the rock, and from a window in this the girls presently saw Maurice looking out. It was too far to talk, but he signalled to them that he was all right, and they returned into the room, much comforted, to find that the old women had lighted the fire and spread a carpet on the divan near it. Presently they brought in a tray of savoury food, the nature of which was not evident, save that it contained no meat, and set it on a stool close to the divan, when the girls were thankful to partake of it. Too tired even for surmises, they went to bed immediately afterwards, sleeping so soundly on their hard couch that even the thunder of a mallet on a board, which summoned the monks to service at midnight, failed to wake them.

They slept far into the next day, and it was late in the afternoon when they looked out into the courtyard, to see Maurice, in full Greek costume, wandering

disconsolately about, and gazing up at their window. They wondered that he had made no attempt to reach them, but another glance showed one of the old women sitting like Cerberus at the foot of the steps leading to their corridor, with the evident purpose of preventing any intrusion.

"Oh, Maurice, how nice and respectable you look!" cried Zoe. "That kilt suits you beautifully."

"It doesn't," said Eirene indignantly. "He looks as if he was going to a masked—no, a fancy ball. He ought always to wear English country clothes."

"And go to the opera in them, like the proverbial British tourist, I suppose?" said Zoe. "But why didn't you get some clothes for us, Maurice, if they let you go out shopping?"

"They don't, but there's a Greek village somewhere near, and the old monk who looks after me—who is second in command, or prior, or something—got me these things through a *kosmikos*, who seems to be a sort of lay-brother. But the women's dress round here seems to be distinctly advanced—rather markedly rational, in fact—and I didn't think you'd care to wear it."

"Oh, well, tell them to send us two blouses and some stuff, and we'll make skirts for ourselves—and scissors and needles and cotton, of course—and some hairpins. But how are we to pay?"

"With promises, I suppose. The people seem to share Stoyan's touching faith in an Englishman's word—which is rather rudely shaken in his case now, unfortunately. I told the monk I'd pay when we got back to civilisation."

"But why are we here at all?" asked Eirene.

"That they either can't or won't tell me. It has something to do with one of the Committees, evi-

dently—trust them to have a finger in the pie—but I can't make out how long we are to be kept here, or whether anything is to happen or not. The monks are not half bad old fellows. The Megoumenos—that's the abbot—has been trotting me round this morning to show me the church and the library and all the chapels, and at dinner last night he was full of the most infantile questions. Of course, he had to ask them all through Papa Athanasios, who is my particular monk, and what with his French and mine, the abbot must have amassed some wonderful information."

"It's all very well their being nice, but will they let us out?" broke in Zoe.

"Certainly not at present, but I shall work at them patiently. I haven't quite got at the state of affairs yet, but there seem to be two parties among the monks, and one of them may be more pliable than the other."

"And are they going to keep us shut up in this room?"

"Why, you see, you really have no business here at all. Thanks to Eirene's greatness, you are in the quarters reserved for lady pilgrims of the very highest rank, but you can't be let out while the monks are about, lest you should distract their minds. I believe that when they are safely in church you will be allowed to walk about outside, and then you will have to spend part of your time in sitting under my window and talking to me, for I shall be locked up. The idea is that if we were all free at once, we might escape, you see. But there are little bits of garden mixed up with the buildings, where you may walk, only you must take care not to go too near the edge of the rock, for there's no protection whatever. And

of course your wardress, or duenna, or whatever her capacity is, will chaperon you everywhere. Isn't she a caution? I spent ever so long trying to get her to go up and ask you if I mightn't come and call, and her only answer to my blandishments was to threaten to brain me with her keys. Ah, there goes the ~~semantiron~~—the wooden gong thing that calls the monks to church. I'll retire gracefully to my cell, and you will profit by my self-effacement."

The exterior of the buildings of Hadgi-Antoniou became well and wearily known to the two girls during the days that followed, as they paced from courtyard to garden-patch and back again, to the accompaniment of the lusty shouts from the church which marked the monks' responses to the service. The regularity noticeable in western monastic edifices was here conspicuous by its absence, for though the church, the refectory, and the two blocks of rooms devoted to visitors might be conceived to have been intended to occupy the sides of a square, all symmetry had been destroyed by the crowd of smaller chapels, and of cottages occupied by the monks, which seemed to have been dropped down anywhere and at every angle. There was no encircling wall, which the impregnable position of the monastery rendered unnecessary, and though here and there a tower, or the end of a building, reached the very edge of the plateau, its fringes were generally occupied by uninteresting pieces of garden, in which the girls would sit, looking at the cloudy mountains to the north, or the dim country to the south, until their gaoler would rattle her keys to intimate that the service was ~~hearing~~ its end, and they must return to the custody of their room. Once they stood in the narthex, or porch, of the church, which was decorated in fresco with lively

representations of the Torments of the Lost, and with infinite precaution, peeped in, to see the monks at worship, leaning on their crutched staves, and shouting incessant responses, while the metallad and jewelled figures on the *ikonostasis* made a blaze of light and colour in the prevailing dimness.

Permission to see Maurice any nearer than the courtyard was still rigorously refused, but he spent most of his free time under their window; and when the difficulties of cutting out with a hopeless pair of scissors had been overcome, Zoe, congratulating herself on her diplomacy, announced that the need of clothes was too urgent to allow of his being entertained by more than one at a time. Accordingly, she sat working at one of the farther windows while Eirene talked to Maurice at that looking into the courtyard, but she would have found it difficult to formulate definite reasons for her altruism. A vague feeling that the more closely Eirene's interests were linked with theirs, the more hope there would be of a satisfactory compromise in the future, was perhaps her strongest impression. But one afternoon Eirene called to her excitedly to come, since Maurice had news. Zoe flew to her side.

"No, no, not news from outside," said Maurice quickly. "Why did you put it like that, Eirene? It's only that I have found out what's wrong among the monks here. It seems that there are two parties, a Greek and a Thracian party, as in Emathia generally. The Greeks are in possession, of course, and the Hegoumenos is a Greek, but the other lot are pretty strong, and have been gradually ousting the Greeks from the minor offices of the community. Their idea is to carry the monastery over to the Exarchist side—what you and Professor Panagiotis call the schismatics, Eirene—and Scythia is giving them a helping hand.

The poor old Hegoumenos has only one idea—to keep matters from coming to a crisis; for though he knows the few he can trust, and the ringleaders on the other side, he doesn't know how the main body of the monks would vote, but he fears the worst. It seems to have been a Scythian emissary who arranged for our being brought here, on the pretext that Eirene's life was in danger outside. At least, that was what they told him, but I should say that the Thracian party knew something more. At any rate, I have some hope of getting him to let us go if we are left alone long enough. I'm on the track of the dodge by which they let the ladders down so as to make a way to the ground, with a rope-ladder at the bottom, and if they would leave us unguarded one night we might get down by that, for we could never work the capstan without half the monks to help. Then we might hide in the village till we could get a message through to Wylie."

"But why not send the message at once?" cried Zoe.

Maurice held up empty hands. "Unfortunately, we can only pay in promises," he said.

"But can't you get the Hegoumenos to let us go?"

"He daren't. Only a definite order from the Patriarch would give him courage to override the opposition of the Thracian monks, and that would probably mean the loss of the monastery for the Greeks. No, our only hope is a little calculated carelessness one night, and that I trust we may be able to arrange."

But the very next day Maurice appeared with a long face. "I'm afraid it's all up," he said. "I wouldn't have told you, only I thought you ought to be prepared. There's some Scythian official coming here, and he's due to-night."

"It mayn't be about us," suggested Zoe, without conviction.

"It is. He's coming to ascertain Eirene's wishes, so the Hegoumenos told me—for the purpose of frustrating them, I should imagine."

"Oh, what can Captain Wylie be doing?" cried Zoe.

"Why, how could he possibly know where we are? Who would think of looking for us here? If he paid the ransom——"

"But I thought the brigands were honest in a way. Would they take the ransom without giving us up?"

"Ah, Stoyan thought he had a grievance against us, you see——" Maurice broke off suddenly. "I only hope he gave poor old Wylie a safe-conduct. We know that if he's all right he'll be moving heaven and earth to find us."

"Maurice," cried Eirene eagerly, "if I gave you the girdle of Isidora now, would there be time? Could you bribe them to let us go before this man comes?"

Maurice shook his head. "I'm afraid it's too late," he said. "Money might do it, but a thing like that would be clear evidence that they had been bribed, and the Hegoumenos would suffer. After all, you can't wonder that when the whole future of the monastery is at stake, he should think more of it than of us."

"Well," said Zoe, with aggressive cheerfulness, "I am going to finish my work. I won't face a presumably civilised man—even if he is only a Tartar underneath—in a skirt like a *vivandière's*. You had better do yours too, instead of going out this morning, Eirene. There's the *semantron*, Maurice. Retire to your cell."

"How can you be so flippant?" said Eirene indignantly, taking up her work with languid fingers.

"If I wasn't, I should cry, which would be both useless and disgraceful. We seem fated to fall back

again every time we think our troubles are at an end."

"I suppose you hate me?" said Eirene.

"Oh no, I don't. We're all in the same boat, for one thing, and you didn't mean to do all the things you have done, you know. It was Eirene-ism, not deliberate wickedness."

"I think you are the most absolutely heartless person I ever met!" cried Eirene, with flashing eyes.

"Very well. I'm sure it's better to be heartless in our present circumstances. It will save us loads of misery."

They worked in silent mutual indignation for some little time, and then Eirene spoke suddenly, with an obvious effort.

"I have a plan," she said. "I think I see how to put things right."

"Then please forget it. It was your last bright idea that got us into this fix, you know."

"I know it was, and I will atone for it. When this Scythian comes, I will announce boldly who I am, and promise to submit in future. Of course they think that you and Maurice were concerned in my escape; but I will assure them that you had nothing to do with it—that I merely seized on you to help me, and that you had no idea who I was until it was impossible for you to do anything. They would make you promise to keep all that had happened a secret, no doubt, but I think they would let you go, and take me back to Scythia. Shouldn't you be a little sorry for me, Zoe? We have been so much together—and it would mean that I had given up my mission. You asked me if I would do even that for you and Maurice, you know, and now I am going to do it. We shall never see each other again. If they

were to forgive me, I suppose you might possibly hear that I was married to somebody, but if not, you would never hear of me any more."

"Oh, don't be tragic!" said Zoe, the more impatiently that she was feeling rather ashamed of herself. "How can you go on in this way?"

"But it is tragedy. Why won't you understand, Zoe, that there are some things in life that can't be put right by making an epigram, and then thinking of something else? Some day you will know, perhaps. Have you ever heard of the Black Nuns?"

"No, I didn't know there were any nuns in Scythia."

"There are many, and the Black Nuns are particularly useful in taking charge of people who won't do what they are told, or who have committed indiscretions—people of high rank, I mean. I committed an indiscretion in running away. The disobedient girls return to the world obedient. The indiscreet ones die, sooner or later, and there is a grand funeral. A grand funeral can't hurt any one, can it? And it shows that the relatives have nothing to conceal."

"Oh, do stop!" cried Zoe. "You are letting things get upon your mind. I'm sorry I said that about your having got us into this scrape; I was a beast to do it. Let us talk about something else."

"I think I could do it—I am almost sure I could—if it saved you—and Maurice," pursued Eirene, lingering over Maurice's name with the tenderness that spoke volumes to Maurice's sister. "But it's no use pretending that I don't know what it would mean, or that I should like it."

"Oh, do try and have a little sense!" entreated Zoe. "Can you imagine for a moment that Maurice—or any real man—would let a girl sacrifice herself to save him? I don't know what kind of creatures

you can have known, Eirene; you have such hopeless ideas. You may be quite sure that Maurice would never go away into safety and leave you to be unkindly treated."

"He might not have the choice. I should be carried off secretly. But you and Maurice will think of me sometimes, and talk about me——"

"And come and shed tears on your grave, I suppose? Eirene, will you have the goodness not to be sentimental? If you were carried off to Scythia, Maurice and I would go after you and rescue you. I would pretend to be you and remain in your place, while Maurice got you away, and then I should appeal to the British Ambassador and get rescued myself."

CHAPTER XVII.

UNMASKED.

IN spite of her optimistic view of the situation, Zoe passed a disturbed night, which the shouts and the persistent creaking of the windlass announcing the arrival of the Scythian emissary did not tend to soothe. She was oppressed by the conviction that she ought to confide in Eirene, while at the same time she was resolved to do nothing of the kind. It was unfair, she owned, to receive her confidence and give her none in return, but the risks were too great. Eirene might welcome the disclosure, since it would bridge the infinite gulf she must believe to exist between herself and Maurice, but it might make her all the more determined to sacrifice herself, if she realised how important it was that he should not remain in Scythian hands. And, on the other hand, she might refuse to believe it, and in her pique insist on acting alone, when common action on the part of the three was indispensable. Impatiently Zoe wished that it had been possible to predict what Eirene would do in any given circumstances. It was the uncertainty that made her so difficult to deal with, and Zoe almost regretted that she had not done as Maurice advised, and told her earlier, since things could not well have fallen out worse than they had done. At last, as she

tossed and turned on the unyielding divan, she decided on a compromise. She would not tell Eirene before the interview with the Scythian official, lest she should do anything rash, but as soon as they had some idea what was to happen she would make the disclosure.

The Scythian was evidently not inclined to waste time, for the girls had only just breakfasted when a large and imposing letter was brought in by the old woman. In it M. Boris Constantinovitch Kirileff did himself the honour to recall himself to her Royal Highness's recollection, and craved humbly permission to wait upon her, either in her own apartments or in the guest-room of the monastery.

"Now comes the tug of war!" said Eirene. "We don't want him up here, do we, Zoe? We will see him in the guest-room, then. I remember him at Pavelsburg. He is in the Imperial Chancellery."

The old woman had brought a pen and ink, but the only paper available was the back of M. Kirileff's beautiful un-folded epistle, on which the answer was duly written by Zoe. When it had been despatched, she and Eirene looked at one another rather anxiously. It was undeniable that their appearance was not distinguished. A badly fitting blouse, a home-made skirt, moccasins instead of shoes, and a paucity of hairpins—for none had been obtainable in the village—are drawbacks which only beauty of a very exceptional order can successfully surmount.

"I shouldn't mind a bit, if it wasn't that we want to look so particularly dignified," said Zoe. "Suppose you put on the famous girdle, Eirene. That ought to make an impression."

"Hasn't it brought us enough bad luck already?" asked Eirene, with a shudder. "No, it shall stay where it is."

"Look here, Eirene; don't do anything rash," Zoe entreated her. "This man may merely have orders to escort you to Therma, so don't begin by making a tragic submission."

"I assure you I shall be altogether the Princess in my dealings with M. Kirileff," returned Eirene, as the old woman appeared on the threshold and beckoned to them. "I shall resort to brag."

"You mean bluff," said Zoe, in a stage whisper, as they descended the stairs. "Shall we see Maurice, I wonder?"

There was no sign of Maurice in the courtyard, but when they mounted the steps to the guest-room they caught sight of him among a number of monks, who were gathered round him as though responsible for his safe-keeping. But they had no time to ask one another what this meant, for a well-preserved man of uncertain age, in immaculate morning dress, advanced with every demonstration of respectful delight, and touched Eirene's hand with a highly waxed moustache. She had meant to present him to Zoe, but as though he had divined her intention, he led her immediately up the room to the divan on which the old Hegoumenos was seated, a picture of puzzled, anxious willingness to oblige. He indicated to Eirene the place next him, and M. Kirileff, on her invitation, also seated himself, but at a respectful distance. Zoe's eyes met Maurice's with keen amusement.

"You are the bearer of some message for me, I suppose?" said Eirene to the Scythian. He bowed profoundly.

"On the contrary, madame, I have only an apology—an apology on my own account for the measures taken on your behalf. I know how presumptuous and uncalled for they must appear, and nothing but



the conviction that they have secured your safety at a moment of imminent danger could give me courage to appear in your presence."

"Then I am to attribute my being brought here to your influence?" said Eirene, with the slightest possible lifting of the eyebrows. "I confess, monsieur, my own impression would be that you had left me to pass unaided through a month of incessant danger, and only interposed to destroy my hopes when I was upon the very verge of safety."

"Madame, the greatness of your mind will quickly set my conduct in the true light. As a man of honour and the faithful servant of my august master, whose affection for your illustrious house needs no assurances from me, I humbly assure you that at the moment you supposed yourself on the verge of safety you were in more frightful peril than during the whole month with the brigands."

"You astonish me, monsieur. From whom was this danger to arise?"

"It was not a matter of the future, madame; it existed already—in your very *entourage*. Has your Royal Highness any knowledge of the true character of the young man and woman who shared your captivity?"

"A month in their company in such circumstances ought to be conclusive, monsieur. I have the pleasure to be able to assure you that they have both displayed a fidelity which would be praiseworthy in dependants of my own, but which must be unique in the case of strangers united to me only by the bond of a common disaster."

"You call them strangers, madame. I am to understand they were unknown to you at the time you undertook your—pilgrimage?"

"At the time I undertook my—pilgrimage," replied Eirene, with an intonation which brought an involuntary smile to Zoe's lips, "I was as absolutely ignorant of the existence of Mr and Miss Smith as they were of my identity when chance threw us together on our journey."

"Chance? Ah, yes, the meeting was casual on your part, no doubt, madame. But the ignorance of the brother and sister Smith exists only in your mind, so guileless, so unsuspecting of treachery."

"I assure you, monsieur, I am by no means unsuspecting by nature," said Eirene, with distinct resentment. "So determined was I to preserve my *incognito* that I communicated the route and object of my—pilgrimage to no one but the lady who attended me, and who is since dead. It was impossible for any one else to be acquainted with it."

Zoe waited eagerly for the answer. The artistic way in which M. Kirileff was leading up to his *dénouement* appealed to her critical faculty. From a purely literary point of view she could have applauded the unblushing lie with which he countered Eirene's declaration.

"Ah, madame, these things leak out somehow. If we were acquainted with your intention—I speak of the office I have the honour to represent—and were watching over your safety without your knowledge, if it was known also to the plotter Panagiotis, why should it be unknown to these tools of his?"

"If you were watching over my safety, monsieur, I can only say that your measures left something to be desired," said Eirene smartly. "I will remind you that you have just applied a very offensive term to a lady and gentleman whom the events of the past month have taught me to hold in the highest esteem."

"I could wish, madame, that they had betrayed themselves in their true colours, since that would have released me from the sad duty of acquainting you with their worthlessness. They are the creatures of the arch-conspirator Panagiotis in an attempt to deprive you of the rights bequeathed to you by your imperial ancestors."

"Monsieur, you speak in riddles. The thing is too absurd."

"Precisely, madame. It is too absurd. But if you ask this man, this woman"—he pointed an accusing finger at Maurice, who was laboriously endeavouring to follow the rapidly spoken French, and succeeding at intervals, and at the deeply interested Zoe—"who they really are, they will assure you that their true name is not Smith, but Teffany, and that they are descended from Basil, the elder brother of your ancestor Leo, son of the Emperor John Theophanis."

"But this is preposterous!" cried Eirene.

"Madame, you have chosen the only word that fits the situation. It is preposterous. They were brought up by their grandfather, a respectable landed proprietor named Smith, who became possessed, late in life, with the delusion that he was a descendant of the last Christian Emperor. The delusion would, no doubt, have died with him, but, unfortunately, it came to the ears of the firebrand Panagiotis in one of his visits to England for the purpose of stirring up support for his incendiary propaganda. He had been repulsed by your illustrious father, who preferred to await in dignified passivity the results of the diplomacy of his august friend the Emperor of Scythia, rather than put himself forward as the figurehead of a revolutionary conspiracy. Thus deprived of a *raison d'être* for his schemes, this man Panagiotis finds himself

confronted with the means at once of forwarding his plots and of revenging himself upon your father's daughter. He will produce a nearer heir. Now, madame, mark the course of events. Your impetuous resolution to proceed on pilgrimage to the shrines most nearly associated with the devotion of your illustrious race has the effect of bringing you within the range of the conspiracy, which has been so deftly engineered that even we, who are secretly protecting your movements, are unacquainted with its full purpose. The fiend Panagiotis sees his opportunity, and instructs his tools to worm themselves by insidious means into your confidence——"

"You are mistaken, monsieur," with a last effort of dignity. "It was I who addressed myself to Miss Smith."

"Alas, madame! must I point out that this apparent reserve was but a means of piquing the curiosity of a young lady who had just emancipated herself from the safeguards of her rank, and might be supposed to possess an innocent curiosity as to the concerns of her *bourgeois* fellow-travellers?" Eirene grew scarlet, and Zoe, remembering their early acquaintance, could not repress a smile. "The ruse was successful. By the time the Roumi frontier was crossed, the conspirators, with a confederate who poses as an officer of the British Army, were in possession of your Royal Highness's confidence. I tell you frankly, with a full sense of the seriousness of my words, that but for the accident to the bridge, which I cannot help regarding as providential—I am no atheist, thank the saints!—I do not know what the result would have been. Whether you would ever have been permitted to reach Therma I cannot tell. It was the apparently commonplace and innocuous character of your com-

panions that baffled all suspicion, and I doubt if our agents would have penetrated their true nature in time. But if you had once reached Therna, and accepted the treacherous hospitality of Panagiotis at his country villa, there can be no doubt that you would never have left it alive and free. You were an obstacle to his plans. Only your death, or your acceptance of an alternative, too degrading to you as a Princess and a woman for me to do more than hint at it, would have made his schemes safe."

"Zoe," broke in Maurice, as Eirene changed colour again when her eyes, vainly seeking a resting-place, met his, "what is this blackguard saying? Tell him to talk English, or if he can't, to let you interpret. I can't understand what he says, but he is making Eirene miserable."

"He says that we are impostors, and that we made up to her on the journey that we might decoy her to the Professor's and kill her," said Zoe succinctly.

"Rubbish!" said Maurice. "Eirene, how can you listen to such nonsense? You know us too well to believe it, I should hope. Zoe and I will explain the whole thing to you in five minutes, if you will see us somewhere without this man, who seems to be mixing himself up in things which don't concern him in the least."

"I do not speak English," observed M. Kirileff mildly, and—so Zoe averred afterwards—untruthfully, "but it appears to me that this young man is presuming upon the confidence with which you have honoured him, madame. He has to learn that you are no longer unprotected, but that the shield of Scythia is interposed between your royal person and his presumptuous designs. I cannot sufficiently admire the way in which Providence has utilised the atrocious crime of the

brigands to preserve you from actual danger to your life and peace. * The impostor durst not announce himself in his pretended character, knowing the devotion of the miscreants—however misdirected—to the Slavic and Exarchist idea, and the necessity of retaining your confidence forced him to treat you with respect and reserve. It was when the ransom was paid, and you were once more at his mercy, that you would have been again in extreme danger. That danger I had the happiness to avert by bringing you here. My measures were hasty, even violent, I confess—I had no choice—but they were successful."

"Your fidelity calls for my highest gratitude, monsieur," said Eirene, rallying her forces. "I do not mind confessing that I am overwhelmed by the news you have brought me. Such treachery—such duplicity—where I saw only loyalty and respect, is almost incredible. This impudent assertion, which touches my rights—what course is to be taken respecting it?"

"In my opinion, madame—which is not without weight, if I may respectfully say so, with my superiors—there could be no more suitable place for the detention of the culprits than this. It is the most humane, as well as the most convenient, view of the case to regard them as suffering from hereditary mania, but they cannot be allowed to impose their wild hallucinations upon the world. We must have from each of them a definite confession of the imposture, and of the steps by which they were induced to acquiesce in it, as well as of their motives in forcing themselves upon you. Until that confession is signed, they may well remain here in safety, carefully looked after by the good monks, and causing scandal to no one."

"The idea is excellent," said Eirene. "Tell me,"

she added harshly, turning to Maurice, "are you willing to sign a confession of the imposture of which you have been guilty, and to entreat my pardon for your treachery?"

"I'm not going to sign anything that isn't true," returned Maurice. "I don't carry all my family papers about with me, but I have them safe at home. It's as certain that we are descended from the elder son of John Theophanis as that you are from the younger."

Eirene raised her head disdainfully. "The comparison shows your state of mind," she said. "You are undoubtedly labouring under a delusion, and it is only charity to see that you are kept in safety until it has passed away."

"Oh, very well. Tell the first British Consul you come across your idea of charity, and see what he will say."

"The British Consul would do nothing," she said sharply. "You seem to forget that by alleging a Greek descent you have deliberately renounced your British citizenship, and placed yourself among my subjects—mine."

"I am sorry to appear to contradict you, but when you come to think of it, isn't it just the other way about?"

"Oh, this is too much!" cried Eirene, rising from her seat. "Am I to endure these insults—to be defied to my very face? And this from one whom I trusted!"

"Calm yourself, madame," said M. Kirileff, seizing the opportunity to point a judicious moral. "All your friends must regret that your impatience of restraint, your love of the bizarre, led you into such a situation, but you will not be left to cope with it alone. My instructions are to inquire your wishes for the future?"

"Oh, to go anywhere, away from here!" She sank upon the divan again.

"I fear"—M. Kirileff's tone was slightly severe—"that your Royal Highness can hardly expect to be received at Court as before, at any rate until your reputation for—shall I say eccentricity of behaviour?—has been in some degree forgotten. You would not care to remain here?"

"Here?" Eirene shuddered. "I detest every stone of the place. No, monsieur, I must be in a town. My health, my nerves, have suffered cruelly from the miseries of the past month, and from this crowning trial. I need medical care, female attendance."

"I can well understand your feelings, madame. As I came here, Madame Ladoguin, the wife of our Consul-General at Therma, begged me to place her house and her services at your disposal for as long as you required them. She is a charming and accomplished woman, and her society will cheer and refresh you."

"Very well," said Eirene, rising. "I hardly dare indulge hope for the future, after what I have suffered to-day. You will pardon me if I leave you now, monsieur. I can endure no more."

"I am grieved to have been the means of inflicting this pain upon you, madame." M. Kirileff escorted her to the door, noticing the stony glance of disdain she bestowed upon Maurice as she swept past him, and returned to his seat with a complete change of manner, while the monks pushed forward to listen.

"I need not waste much time on you," he said contemptuously to Maurice and Zoe. "You know why you are here, and the step you must take to obtain your release. Until you take that step, you may be very sure you will remain in safe custody."

Understand that you are prisoners, no longer guests. We do not propose to furnish troublesome people like you with the luxuries of a first-class hotel. You will see that the man is placed in one of your dungeons," he added authoritatively to Papa Athanasios, "and the woman in one of the less commodious cells reserved for female pilgrims."

"But, lord, the dungeons have not been used for hundreds of years!" protested the monk in his bad French.

"Then have one cleared for the prisoner. If there are rats, so much the better. It is unnecessary for me to use threats," he addressed Maurice again; "your own mind—dull-witted Englishman though you are—will paint the truth for you. Here you are, and here you stay until you write out and sign the confession I shall leave you. No one knows where you are, or would think of looking for you here, and even if your prison was known, an army could not rescue you. Her Royal Highness is not vindictive, but we allow no tampering with the heritage of a princess under Scythian protection. I may as well tell you that your accomplice, the alleged British officer, is on the point of leaving Emathia, on the plea that he is summoned back to his military duties."

"He doesn't know Wylie, does he, Zoe?" said Maurice, as they were left standing together for a moment while M. Kirileff conversed with the Hegoumenos, and Papa Athanasios was absent preparing the dungeon.

"Of course not. Oh, Maurice, do you believe now what I said to you about Eirene? I knew she would take it like this."

"It's only for the first few minutes," said Maurice, unruffled. "When she gets by herself, and this fellow

isn't by to make vile suggestions, she'll remember all we've been through together, and she'll know we simply couldn't have meant any harm to her. Of course, it was bound to give her a shock, but she'll be frightfully sorry when she realises the things she has said."

"Maurice, you would contentedly lie down and let Eirene trample on you! She is—no, I won't say it."

"It's awfully hard on you, I know," said Maurice. "I wish you could dissociate yourself from me in some way."

"As if I would ever give away your case! Why, it's mine as much as yours. No, we will stick to each other, Maurice, if all the Eirenes in the world turn against us. I shall set to work on a novel at once—making it up in my mind, of course. I have never been able to find time to get to work absolutely undisturbed before. And you will frame a plan for governing Emathia, no doubt. Dear boy, keep up heart!"

The tears were in Zoe's eyes as she spoke, and her cheerful voice shook. Maurice patted her on the shoulder.

"All right, Zoe. Papa Athanasios will look after me, you may be sure. Don't get dismal. Wylie will be here before long, trust him. And don't think too hardly of Eirene."

"Always Eirene!" Zoe stamped her foot as Maurice was led away. He turned and nodded gaily to her, and a curious thought came into her mind. "Could it be?" she asked of herself. "Shall I suggest it to Maurice? No, it would be worse for him if it turned out not to be true. I wish it might be that, for his sake—and hers and mine, too, for the matter of that. But I don't believe she could do it."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"SPLENDIDE MENDAX."

It seemed to Zoe that, save for the fact that Maurice's place of confinement was called a dungeon and hers a cell, the change in the state of affairs pressed rather more hardly on her than on him. Her new room was very small, very dirty, absolutely devoid of furniture, and almost destitute of light, a small grated aperture just under the ceiling offering the only approach to a window. Moreover, Maurice had the friendly Papa Athanasios to look after him, while the old woman who acted as Zoe's gaoler seemed positively to gloat over her humiliation. This attitude was in itself a challenge, and before Zoe had been in her new quarters half an hour she had bullied old Marigot into providing a broom and fetching her rug and other possessions from the room she had occupied with Eirene. The cell looked much less hopeless when a certain amount of the dust of ages had been removed, the rug spread on the stone divan, and Zoe's few clothes neatly rolled up as cushions. In the homely work of tidying up, moreover, she wore off some of her indignation against Eirene, and was able to turn her mind to other subjects. Her words to Maurice had not been idle, or designed merely to console him. The idea for a story had come into her mind, and was working itself out

all the more vividly for her removal during the past month from her usual surroundings and pursuits. It was going to be splendid, she felt, with the curious leaping of heart which the self-development of a new theme always caused in her. If only she had her note-books at hand! But since they were not to be had, she must work more carefully than usual, more by rule and line, so as to be able to reproduce the story from memory when she regained her freedom. The whitewashed walls of her cell offered a ready-made tablet for memoranda, and a rusty nail she had discovered in the course of her sweepings would serve as a stylus. In marked contrast with the excitement of the morning, she passed a quiet and perfectly happy afternoon absorbed in blocking out her chapters, raising horrible suspicions in the mind of her gaoler, who could only imagine that the mysterious signs on the wall were some kind of sorcery directed against the welfare of the monastery.

The next morning Zoe was at work again as soon as she had put her room tidy, and it was with unconcealed impatience that she found herself summoned by old Marigo to follow her. "Come, O girl, quickly!" she could understand this, at any rate, though neither now nor at any other time could she extract any rational information from the wardress, as Maurice called her. Following her down the steep time-worn stairs, she found Eirene, escorted by M. Kirileff, awaiting her in the courtyard, and she was not too much engrossed with her story to derive some pleasure from noticing that Eirene looked pale and ill at ease. It was M. Kirileff who spoke, after receiving an imperious gesture.

"Her Royal Highness is anxious even now to save you from the penalty due to your brother's obstinacy,"

he said. "If you choose to sign the confession I have drawn out, you will be permitted to attend her to Therma, and she will graciously see that you are sent home from there."

"Thank you, I prefer to be here," returned Zoe briskly. "You don't know what a kindness you are doing me by keeping me where there are no visitors. I have not had an idle moment yet, and my time is fully occupied far ahead."

M. Kirileff looked unaffectedly astonished, and Eirene interposed, in the languid tones of one weary of the subject.

"I regard you with compassion," she said, "for I know that your facile imagination can make the wildest dreams appear realities to you. Your brother I cannot trust myself to see, for he has not the same excuse. If it was you who suggested the imposture, and induced him to acquiesce in it, I can only advise you to undo the harm you have done in leading astray an otherwise worthy young man. The good Father Athanasios will convey to him any message from you advising him to submit, but no others."

"I'm sorry you took the trouble to make such an arrangement, for it won't be wanted," said Zoe. "And when you have had time to think things over, and realise what you have done, I shall be sorry for you, Eirene."

"There is no use in prolonging this discussion, I think," said Eirene to M. Kirileff. "We are not likely to meet again," she added, over her shoulder, to Zoe, "but should you return to a better mind, I shall have pleasure in extending my patronage to you."

Zoe returned to her cell fuming, and it was some time before she was sufficiently calm to resume her

work, while Eirene turned away to begin her journey to Therma in M. Kirileff's company. He had horses, servants and tents awaiting him below the rock, and a girl from the village had been impressed to wait upon her. She was treated with the utmost deference; her tent was pitched apart from the rest; her pleasure was consulted as to the hours of halting or starting again; but she was kept perpetually under surveillance. In her tent her maid watched her; if she wandered outside it, two *cavasses* kept her faithfully in sight; on the march M. Kirileff, riding beside her, at precisely the right distance to the rear, divided his attention between her face and the track. He had a way of leading the conversation round to Maurice and Zoe, or to her experiences in the brigands' camp, but her replies baffled him. They told so little that he could draw no conclusions, and they expressed still less. It was with a mixture of resentment and relief that he handed her over at last to the care of Madame Ladoguin, and gave his final instructions to that lady in private.

"I hope you may have better success with our charming Princess than I have had," he said. "I no longer wonder that she was able to plan and effect her escape from Scythia as she did."

"Well, you could hardly expect her, after her late experiences, to confide in so youthful and *débonnaire* a person as yourself, could you?" smiled his hostess. "But with a woman, and one who has seen something of her world, it may be different."

"If there is any one in the world who can win her confidence, it is Chariclea Feodorovna," said M. Kirileff, with every appearance of fervent conviction; "and I only trust she may."

"Why?" the quick note of alarm in the lady's voice

showed that she scented danger. "You don't imagine that she has any sympathy with the impostor?"

"None whatever—at present; but with a woman one always fears a change of mind. There is something most wearisomely convincing about the youth Smith. A man of any other nation, convicted of base treachery in the presence of a lady whose good opinion he must surely prize, would have protested, entreated, asseverated his innocence. But this stolid Englishman does not even give himself the trouble to offer a statement. He contents himself with asserting that he is in the right, in a tone which implies that it signifies nothing whether she believes it or not, and proceeds to drive her to frenzy by insisting on his pretensions. There is something impressive in this brutal simplicity."

"Quite so," said Mme. Ladoguin. "And you think it impressed her, or will yet succeed in doing so?"

"I am trusting to your influence that it may not. I will own that I have had moments of alarm. I imagined that I distinguished on her face a look resembling relief when I first revealed to her the nature of the deception. But it passed quickly when I pointed out its sordid motive, and the *bourgeois* origin of the plotters. A peasant would have been infinitely more welcome as a rival than a respectable youth of the middle class."

"But I had the idea that these Tefanyas—these Smiths, I should say—belonged to the *petite noblesse*, what the English call 'gentry,'" said Mme. Ladoguin. M. Kirileff smiled meaningly.

"That is an idea I must beg you to banish from your mind. For the purposes of conversation with the Princess, they are of a superior order of agriculturists. I brought the thing home to her when

I pointed out that she would have been offered a marriage with young Smith as the price of her life ~~and~~ she fallen into the hands of Panagiotis."

"You have prepared the ground well, Boris Constantinovitch. She exhibited disgust?"

"More than disgust—agony. And thereupon the innocent Monsieur Smith spoils the effect by demanding with fury what I have been saying to make her unhappy!"

"Ah, these unrehearsed effects—how they ruin our best scenes! But the young man is certainly impossible. I suppose"—with sudden keenness—"it has not struck you to hint to the young lady that in case of any further escapades on her part, Scythia might be driven to abandon her claim, and take up that of this pretender instead? That would make it easier to manage her."

"You terrify me!" cried M. Kirileff, with genuine alarm. "Is it possible you do not see that our only hold over her is to maintain her in the assurance that ~~hers~~ is the only claim worth considering? The merest suggestion that the youth might conceivably have right on his side would ruin everything. Down would go the barrier of disgust I have erected with so much pains, she would see herself as the usurper instead of him, and even if we continued to support her, the moral support of her own whole-hearted confidence in her rights would be gone."

"I see," said Mme. Ladoguin slowly. "Well, frankly, if that is the case, I wonder at your bringing her here. I will keep a careful watch over her, of course; but in a place like this there are endless opportunities for mischief. Panagiotis is always at hand, and that Captain Wylie is a perfect terror. Since he was tricked into paying the ransom without

rescuing his friends, he has given the city no peace. The consular body are just as tired of him as the authorities are, and he is bringing the Ambassadors at Czarigrad into the matter. He is certain to insist on seeing the Princess when he finds out she is here, to try and discover from her where the Smiths are, and he may persuade her of the truth of their claims."

"He must not see her," was the prompt reply. "Do you think I should have entrusted her to your care if I had not had full confidence in you? You must manage—somehow—anyhow—to keep them apart. A word to the doctor will ensure a certain amount of quiet and retirement for the Princess—she sees only your very intimate friends, and no foreigners, you perceive? Your brother will keep you informed of Captain Wylie's movements, and when he is in the city you will go to no place where you would be likely to meet him, and you will take care that the direction of your drives does not leak out through the servants. He will scarcely force his way into the Consulate, or if he did, I have no doubt your husband would repel force with force, and public opinion would justify him. If he should obtain an entrance by any stratagem, I can trust you to deal with him."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of that. It is the scandal, the unpleasantness. The man is so atrociously persistent."

"I understand. I don't mind telling you that I dislike this delay in Therma as much as you can. But what is to be done? It is all very well to give out that the Princess went on pilgrimage, but every one in the Court circle knows the real state of the case, and she cannot be received as if nothing had happened. Their Imperial Majesties are deeply incensed. I shall represent as strongly as I can the

expediency of bringing her back quickly, and you must prevail upon her to write a letter of penitence and submission, which will help matters on. Short of a convent—and I should not care to trust her in one outside Scythia—she is safer with you than she could be anywhere else.”

“I suppose a letter signed by her would not be sufficient?”

M. Kirileff shook his head. “It would appear too casual. No, the writing must be her own throughout. But I hope much from your persuasions. You will keep constantly before her, of course, the peril and disgrace from which she has been rescued, and point out that her only hope for the future lies in a return to Court favour. One warning I must give you. Don’t attempt to represent the young man Smith as a plotter, or as intending anything but the most honourable and *bourgeois* of marriages. One glance at his face shows you that he is absolutely incapable of the slightest approach to art or *finesse* of any kind. Remember that he is a mere tool in the hands of the remorseless Panagiotis, who spares no one who comes in the way of his schemes.”

“I will remember,” laughed the lady. “It is a comfort that you think the Princess is willing to be persuaded.”

“I do, but I think she needs to be kept in the same mind. I saw signs of wavering myself, on the morning we left Hadgi-Antoniou, when she expressed a wish to see Smith’s sister in private. I pointed out that the girl—who is endowed with more vivacity than her brother—might very probably, in her rage at the discovery of their plot, attempt some violence, and she agreed at once that I had better be present. That is the sort of assistance I hope for from you—an un-

obtrusive influence constantly exerted, both to protect her from intrusion and to turn her thoughts in the right direction."

This conference put Eirene's two guardians into a state of the highest mutual appreciation, and M. Kirileff went on his way to Scythia with an easy mind, leaving his confederate to make Eirene's life a burden to her. The next few weeks were the most absolutely miserable the girl had ever experienced, for she knew exactly what Maurice and Zoe must think of her, and she had no means of fulfilling the task she had set herself. The realisation of the part she must play had come to her in a flash as she sat beside the Hegoumenos on the divan, and listened to the measured periods of M. Kirileff. Her first feeling had been something more than the relief he had read in her face—positive triumph. She had been right, after all, when she suspected Maurice of being a prince in disguise. But even as the thought crossed her mind, she read in the Scythian's expression that she had betrayed herself, and she saw her course clear before her. To remain at Hadgi-Antoniou, throwing in her lot with that of Maurice and Zoe, would do no good. The monastery which had guarded the faith for centuries could guard secrets as well. The prisoners might remain in a living death, unsuspected by the outside world, while it would be announced to Europe that they had met their fate at the hands of the brigands. The Embassies would demand an indemnity and the punishment of the murderers, and Scythia would supply the Roumi Government with the necessary money, while the crime would be added to the record of the next few criminals who had not the wherewithal to grease the palms of justice. Even Wylie would be deceived by a circumstantial story, perhaps

by the production of relics of his friends, and would return sorrowfully to India, taking away their last hope. Eirene saw it all, even while she called up the look of resentment and disgust which had assured M. Kirileff of the success of his rearrangement of facts. She must efface from his mind the memory of her momentary slip, she must deceive even Maurice and Zoe, lest he should see in their faces that he was being played with. She must return to civilisation, and in some way communicate with Wylie, and that she might do this, she must throw dust in the eyes of friend and foe alike.

It was a curious feature of her state of mind that the momentous news which she had heard from M. Kirileff scarcely occurred to her, except as a cogent reason why Maurice and Zoe would not be allowed to go free save as discredited and self-confessed impostors. She did not ask herself what its effect might be on her own future, for the exigencies of the present occupied all her thoughts. The magnitude of her task kept her sleepless during her last night at the monastery, and led her to the desperate attempt, which M. Kirileff had frustrated, to secure Zoe as a confederate. It would be so much easier to communicate with Wylie, or with some British representative, if there were two to watch for opportunities instead of one, that she conceived the idea of inducing Zoe to make an apparent submission and accompany her. The envoy's watchfulness had not only destroyed this hope, but had obliged her to deepen the bitterness with which Zoe must regard her, and she entered on the journey with feelings almost of despair. Without protest she acquiesced in M. Kirileff's suggestion that it should be announced that her Royal Highness had returned from a pilgrim-

age to the shrine of Hadgi-Antoniou, and was resting at Therma after the hardships she had undergone, while the friends who had shared with her the experience of being captured by brigands were making a more extended tour among the rock monasteries near the Morean frontier. The announcement would, at any rate, give Wylie some idea of the whereabouts of his friends, and surely, surely, it must lead him to insist on seeing her, and learning from her the true state of the case.

But in this forecast Eirene had reckoned without Chariclea Feodorovna, and the very capable staff of assistants she had gathered round her. The Princess was received with the tenderest affection and respect, and promptly bound hand and foot with bonds too imperceptible to resent, too strong to break. The doctor who was called in to prescribe for her shattered nerves ordered quiet and retirement, with a very little society of a cheerful and familiar kind. What could be more in accordance with the prescription than to limit Eirene's visitors to selected members of the Scythian colony and a few favoured representatives of those other Powers which were in sympathy with Scythian aims? At the same time, Madame Ladoguin, whose own appearance was a testimony to her skill, took in hand the restoration of her guest's complexion, which had suffered from a month's exposure to all kinds of weather, without the protection of hat or veil. It was clear that Eirene could not appear at the Scythian Court—whither she was so soon to return—with a brown face and red hands, and her adviser acted the beneficent tyrant to the life, forbidding her to go out on days when a particular wind—or any wind—was blowing, and applying healing balms which required, in order to produce their full effect, that the

patient should spend a day in bed. Resistance was useless, and Eirene acquiesced helplessly for fear of arousing suspicion, but in one thing she would not yield. All Madame Ladoguin's persuasions and encouragements could not induce her to write the desired letter of penitence to the Scythian Court. To such expedients was she driven that she would spend whole mornings in writing out drafts of the letter and making beginnings, which were all torn up. "I will not leave Therma until I have done something to help Maurice and Zoe," she said to herself. "After that, it doesn't signify what happens to me. I suppose I must go back to Pavelsburg, but I won't write what isn't true to make them treat me better. Maurice wouldn't, and I won't."

All this time Wylie made no sign. As soon as she reached Therma, Eirene had asked her hostess about him, saying frankly that she wished to thank him for his efforts in procuring her ransom; but she was told that he had returned to India, satisfied that his friends were safe. She did not believe this, but she thought it very probable that he wished it to be believed; in order that he might have more freedom to act, and in her drives she looked narrowly among the crowd of many nationalities that thronged the streets for the tell-tale eyes which no disguise could hide. But she never saw them. Once or twice she ventured casually to inquire of Madame Ladoguin's guests if they knew anything of Captain Wylie, and was always assured, with a look of astonishment, that he had made himself only too well known in the city while he remained there, but that he had now, happily, left it. Still, this did not necessarily prove that he had not returned to it, and Eirene began to wonder whether she could not write to him, as he seemed so strangely slow in

seeking her. She did not know his address, but the British Consul-General would certainly forward a letter. Would it be best to send it by post or by one of the servants? So far as she knew, she was free to correspond with any one she would, and it was merely the feeling that she had very careful and subtle adversaries to deal with that made her hesitate. She could not afford unsuccessful experiments. If it was discovered that she was attempting to communicate with Wylie, the fact would give the lie to the attitude she had so resolutely maintained, and even if it were only discovered that she had written to him, it would enable the Ladoguins to anticipate any step he might take.

Curiously enough, the danger attending both the means of communication she had contemplated was made clear to her on the same day. She was well supplied with money, and had been occupied in the very necessary task of getting some new clothes. One of her orders had been sent to a British firm in Vindobona. It was written in Eirene's name by Madame Ladoguin, who acted as a kind of unofficial lady-in-waiting, but it chanced that she was called out of the room before it was finished, and Eirene addressed and fastened the envelope in a hurry, in order to catch the post. The answer arrived in due time, but the tradesman begged to know whether there had been more than one enclosure, as the letter had been skilfully unclosed and refastened before it reached him. The incident spoke volumes as to the safety of letters confided to the Consulate post-bag, and Eirene realised that, though she had not discovered it, she was under as strict surveillance as that which had proved so irksome on the journey. Was it safe to attempt to bribe the servants, she wondered? They all seemed

anxious to oblige—even, so it struck her, to be bribed—especially Madame Ladoguin's French maid, whose services she shared. Were they also spies, eager to tempt her to employ them, that they might carry a report to their mistress? An impulse, for which she could not account, prompted her to look at the money with which she had been furnished. It was all in gold, and every coin was marked with a tiny scratch in exactly the same place. Eirene gave up the idea of bribing the servants.

One attempt she did actually make, which might have ended more disastrously than it did. She was driving with Madame Ladoguin, and the latter had stopped the carriage at a shop in order to leave a message. Before the *cavass* had time to return, she caught sight of a lady advancing towards the carriage.

"Pardon, dearest Princess!" she said, stepping out hastily, "but that is the Pannonian Consul-General's wife, who has not been presented to you. I won't inflict her on you, if you will permit me to go to her, for she is a sad bore."

Not guessing that the lady in question was really the wife of the British Consul-General, and one of the persons in all Therma whom Madame Ladoguin least wished her to meet, Eirene looked round for some means of utilising this opportunity. The programme of a concert which was to take place for some charity lay on the seat opposite her, and she snatched it up and wrote on it in pencil:—

"The Princess Eirene Féofan will be glad to receive Captain Wylie at any time convenient to him. Let him see that his name is taken to her direct."

She folded the paper, addressed it to the care of the British Consul-General, and beckoned to a beggar whom the absence of the *cavass* had tempted to

draw near the carriage. In her hand she held a gold piece.

"For Sir Frank Francis, at the Consulate of Great Britain," she whispered in French. "This is for you, if you will take it to him."

He looked up at her with greedy, uncomprehending eyes, and she waved him hastily away as Madame Ladoguin turned round. "The British Consul-General!" she repeated, in an agony, and saw that he understood her; but he shambled away down an alley in the opposite direction to that in which the British Consulate lay. Eirene never heard anything more of him or her message, but she realised gradually that she ought to be thankful she had lighted on a rogue too unsophisticated to double his gains by carrying it to the Scythian instead of the British Consul-General.

CHAPTER XIX.

ART WITH A PURPOSE.

AKIN to Eirene's feelings at this time were those of Wylie. As soon as he heard of her arrival in Therma he tried to see her, but was assured that she was too ill to receive visitors. Losing no time, he took ship with Armitage for Morea, and paid a sufficiently exhaustive visit to the rock monasteries on that side of the frontier to make sure that his friends were not and had not been at any of them. There remained only Hadgi-Antoniou, but on trying to penetrate to it he was promptly turned back by the frontier guards, who asserted that he was attempting to lead a Greek band into Emathian territory. Returning to Therma, with the intention of reaching the monastery from thence, he found himself confronted with obstacles of every description. The Vali had become intolerably solicitous for his safety, and refused to let him go without an escort, while declining either to provide the escort or to allow Wylie to raise one for himself. It was the same with the purveyors of guides, horses, servants, all the necessaries of a traveller, but Wylie was stolidly combating one objection after another, when the distant sight one day of Eirene in the Ladoguins' carriage gave a new direction to his thoughts. His determination to see her was, how-

ever, only the prelude to a fresh series of disappointments. Once, and only once, he obtained an entrance into the Scythian Consulate, where he was received by Madame Ladoguin, who in honeyed accents conveyed to him her Royal Highness's thanks for his past services, and regret that she was unable to see him. Entreaties, arguments, threats, fell powerless against the armour of her suave impenetrability, and though Wylie retired with the determination to try his luck another day, he was not admitted again.

After this, he tried writing to Eirene. His first letter was answered in her name by Madame Ladoguin, and conveyed the same message that he had already received from her lips, but couched in more formal terms, as though to rebuke his presumptuous importunity. Two or three succeeding letters remained unanswered, and those that followed were returned unopened. Bribery was the next resort, and he found many itching palms among the servants and underlings of the Consulate; but it was not long before he was forced to the conclusion that none of his messages had been allowed to reach their destination.

There was a certain obstinacy in Wylie that refused to be baffled. He watched the doors of the Consulate, he laid ambushes at spots which Madame Ladoguin and her guest were likely to pass in their drives. But his adversaries were equally obstinate, and far more subtle. Nicetas Mitsopoulo dogged his movements with unfailing watchfulness, and reported daily, sometimes hourly, to his sister. False information as to the direction to be taken by the ladies in their drives was liberally supplied, and the carriage never issued from the Consulate when Wylie was on the watch. And yet his persistence was not without its effect at last. An Englishwoman would have said that it got

upon Madame Ladoguin's nerves. If this wretched Englishman continued to picket the approaches to her house in this way, some accident must at length give him the interview which he sought, for she could not always be on the watch everywhere. After mature consideration, and consultation with her brother, she took one of those bold steps which are possible only to great minds. She called on the wife of the British Consul-General and requested a private interview, in the course of which she complained to her with deep regret of the ungentlemanly conduct of one of her husband's nationals. This person had been one of the party captured by brigands at the same time as Madame Ladoguin's royal guest, and had so far presumed upon the circumstance as to fall violently in love with the Princess, and to persecute her, even now that she had returned to civilisation, with attentions that were as insulting as they were undesired. He waylaid her daily, bribed servants to convey amorous notes to her, and had filled her with such terror and disgust that she could scarcely bring herself to venture beyond the precincts of the Consulate.

To Lady Francis this revelation supplied at once a key to Wylie's persistent efforts, and a new and intense interest in life. In all innocence she lent herself to Madame Ladoguin's manipulation, moved by a sincere pity for him, coupled with a gratifying sense of personal importance in thus becoming involved in the love affairs of a royal personage. She conveyed Madame Ladoguin's appeal to her husband, and Sir Frank, who liked Wylie and was now doubly sorry for him, requested his presence, and talked to him like a father.

"No discredit to you—most natural, I'm sure—but you see, in the case of a young lady of such high rank,

this sort of thing won't do," was the burden of his song, and the impossibility of convincing him of the truth drove Wylie nearly frantic. Sir Frank persisted in regarding his solemn denials as attempts not to compromise the lady, and sturdily demanded why he laid wait for her and annoyed her with letters if he was not in love with her.

"But don't you see, sir," cried Wylie at last, "that the Princess is the last person who saw the Smiths? I only want to know from her the truth about them."

"But you have heard that they are exploring among the monasteries. Why should you wish to discredit the Princess's word and that of M. Kirileff?"

"Why haven't the Smiths written to me? Why can I find out nothing about them? They must want clothes and things—and money. How can they go exploring without it?"

"I see," said Sir Frank, beginning for the first time to regard the mystery as something more than a figment of Wylie's brain. "But what exactly do you want to find out from the Princess?"

"I want to ask her where she left them, and in what circumstances, and how they proposed to manage."

"But you don't need a private interview for that."

"I have never asked for a private interview, sir. I shall be delighted to ask her the questions in the presence of yourself and Ladoguin and the full staff of both Consulates."

"Well, perhaps Lady Francis and Madame Ladoguin would be sufficient for the purpose, and less alarming to the young lady," chuckled Sir Frank. "I'll see about it, then. You leave the matter in my hands, and don't hang about the Scythian Consulate meanwhile—you understand?"

Wylie acquiesced and departed, to rage furiously over the matter in the hearing of Armitage, who was still waiting at Therma to see him through his troubles, and incidentally to make Emathian sketches for the 'Plastic.' He listened placidly to Wylie's wrathful declaration—when his fury at the absolute injustice and stupidity of the accusation allowed him intelligible utterance—that he had been made to look a fool before the whole city. Not even the suggestion of ungentelemanly behaviour appeared to sting him so deeply as the charge of having fallen in love with Eirene.

"Calm yourself," said the artist coolly, when Wylie had anathematised all concerned to an extent that seemed to him sufficient. "You are the lion in the net; well, will you allow me the honour of being the mouse?"

"What's this?" growled Wylie, taking up the large envelope addressed to Eirene which his friend placed before him.

"That is a letter from Princess Florence, Duchess of Inverness, introducing an English artist of the name of Armitage to the Princess Eirene Féofan, whom H.R.H. met in France in the spring."

"And how in the world did you get to know the Duchess of Inverness?"

"I really don't know, unless I say like the old Italian chap, 'I also am a painter.' I had the cheek to ask for a letter in her own writing, lest the Ladognins should suppress it and answer it themselves, like yours. Of course, I didn't say why I was so anxious to see Princess Eirene, but the lady-in-waiting says that the Duchess has suggested she should let me wait upon her with my sketches, and perhaps paint her portrait if she happens to want it done. So I suppose she thinks I'm hard up."

"Well, and am I to go instead of you?" demanded Wylie.

"Oh, blessed innocence! Do you think you would ever be admitted into the Scythian Consulate if you brought a letter from the Emperor of Scythia himself? or that your appearance, and especially your eyes, aren't known to every bootboy about the place? Of course I shall go. You don't catch me abusing the Duchess's kindness by sending an objectionable fire-eater like you—objectionable to Scythia, I mean—to represent me. But I shall have a try at doing your business. What is it you want exactly?"

"To see her, to know from her own lips what has become of them!" cried Wylie. "Tell her that if I still hear nothing of them I shall follow her wherever she goes until I get the truth out of her."

"Gently. This is eminently a case for the use of guile. Now let us devise a scheme. You must remember that it's quite possible you won't be allowed to see her even now. Let us try if we can't arrange it so that I may manage to get hold of the needed information in any case."

They laid their plans, and in due time Armitage delivered his letter at the Consulate, where it caused great searchings of heart. As he had anticipated, it proved impossible to treat an introduction from the art-loving British Princess in the cavalier fashion which was good enough for Wylie's notes, and he was gratified by an intimation that the Princess Eirene would receive him the next day. When he presented himself with his portfolio of sketches, it was no surprise to him to be received first by Madame Ladoguin, who desired to impress upon him, with an unspeakably frank air of taking him into her inmost confidence, that he must not mention in her Royal Highness's

hearing the name of Captain Wylie. He had probably learnt from the rumours of the city of that person's extraordinary behaviour with regard to the Princess, but he could not possibly guess what pain it had given her. Armitage faced the ambassador with a mien as open as her own.

"Thanks so much for telling me," he said, in his boyish way. "I don't suppose I should, in any case, have mentioned him unless the Princess had done it first, but now I'll be extra careful."

When he was ushered into Eirene's presence, he caught a momentary look of disappointment on her face, a glance to see whether any one was following him, which told him in a moment that she had been cherishing the wild hope of seeing Wylie in disguise. The discovery took away half the difficulty of his task, by resolving at once the question whether she was or was not a willing accomplice in the conspiracy of silence. The weary languor of her tones when she asked him where he had studied, and how the Duchess had become acquainted with him, was welcome, as calculated to lull the suspicions of Mme. Ladoguin. It was quickly evident, however, that no temporary assurance was to be allowed to blind that lady's vigilance. She stood between Eirene and Armitage, and handed to the former each sketch as it was taken from the portfolio. It was not until the entire contents had passed through her hands that she retreated to the end of the table, and sat down with some fancy work. Armitage observed that the work was not of a very engrossing nature, for while her hands were busy with it, her eyes were free to roam as before. Eirene was still looking through the sketches, now guaranteed harmless by her guardian herself.

"It has been a great pleasure to me to see your

work," she said graciously to the painter. "I only wish you had brought more portraits. The Duchess of Inverness says you have painted a half-length of the Duke for her."

"I have a photograph of it here, ma'am," and Armitage took the card from a pocket in the portfolio, contriving rather ostentatiously to exhibit first one side and then the other to the vigilant gaze of Mme. Ladoguin, somewhat in the manner of the conjurer who desires to assure his audience that there is no deception.

"Yes, I like that very much," said Eirene, after studying the photograph carefully; "but I have never seen the Duke—or indeed any of the people you have shown me. Have you no portrait of any one I know?"

"Only one, I'm afraid, ma'am—a sketch of Captain Wylie," with a deprecating glance at Madame Ladoguin.

"I must have missed that. Let me see it, please." Armitage produced the portrait from under the others, where Madame Ladoguin had, dexterously slipped it instead of passing it on to Eirene. It was a pencil sketch, worked up with a good deal of care. One foot impatiently advanced, Wylie seemed almost to be stepping out of the picture, with a look of reckless resolution on his face.

"Oh, this is lifelike. How well I know that expression!" said Eirene, with a smile and a sigh over the memories called up by the portrait. "But the picture should be coloured. Nothing can do justice to Captain Wylie that does not show the colour of his eyes."

"This is merely a rough sketch, ma'am. I happened to catch him in an attitude I liked. I tell him I shall work it up into a picture of him terrorising an army with a riding-whip, *à la* General Gordon."

"You will be obliged to alter the background, then. Why place a soldier in such sylvan surroundings?"

"Oh, that was a bit of woodland I wanted to get in somewhere," said the artist frankly. "I was rather proud of it, because I thought I had got the look of that particular kind of bush rather well. You don't like it, ma'am?" with some disappointment. "Perhaps if you saw it in a better light——?" He moved towards the window, and Eirene turned in her chair.

"I see you have made him sign it. What a bold hand he writes!" she observed easily. "Yes, Mr Armitage, I think I did you an injustice. The growth of that particular shrub must be very difficult to render. It is the sweet-scented plant that grows in thickets, is it not?"

She spoke lightly, almost at random, for Armitage had placed the sketch in her hands upside-down, and all the shading of the bushes was discernible as writing.

"You must manage to receive me. When can I see you? Where are the Smiths? I am certain there has been foul play. I have been trying in every possible way for weeks to get an interview with you, but have been assured that you refused it. Only tell me where Smith and his sister are, and how to help them, and I will give you no more trouble. You cannot be so heartless as to abandon them to no one knows what fate.—JAMES GRAHAM WYLIE,"

"When was this taken? Captain Wylie looks thinner than when I saw him," Eirene went on.

"Two days ago, ma'am."

"Two days ago? but not here? He is not in Therma? I have several times said that I wished to receive Captain Wylie, to thank him for his services

to me, but I was always assured he had returned to India. What does this mean?"

"He is staying at my hotel, ma'am, and I know he is most anxious to wait on you." Armitage cast a glance at Madame Ladoguin which blended cleverly perplexity and a request for pardon, and she responded to it.

"I am grieved to tell you, madame, that since Captain Wylie's return to Therma, his conduct has been such as to call down the reprobation even of his own Consul. The kindest thing is to attribute it to a disordered brain. I can't enter into the details, but it is absolutely impossible for you to receive him."

"I see," said Eirene, with a slight frown. "I must ask you, Mr Armitage, to inform Captain Wylie that it is not convenient to me to receive him."

"It is not for me to question your decision, ma'am," said the artist, "but I think I could explain things to your satisfaction if you would allow it?" She made no sign, and he continued bluntly, "I fancy, ma'am, that my friend could dispense with paying his respects if you would be good enough to send him the information he wants about Mr and Miss Smith."

Eirene raised her eyebrows. "I thought it was understood that when I parted from them they were in perfect health?" she said.

"And cheerfulness, madame," put in Madame Ladoguin. "You have mentioned to me more than once Miss Smith's extreme cheerfulness when you quitted her."

"Yes," said Eirene, with a little smile, "I rather resented her cheerfulness, for I did not like her staying behind, and had exhausted all my powers of persuasion to induce her to return with me to Therma, but in vain. I am afraid that is all I can tell you, Mr

Armitage. And now about your own work. Could you undertake a portrait of me—now, while I am still here?"

"I should be highly honoured, ma'am."

"Then let us decide——" began Eirene, but Madame Ladoguin interposed.

"Dearest Princess, pardon me, but what will Dr Simovics say? He ordered you complete rest from anything that might try the nerves, and you have no idea of the strain of sitting for a portrait. If you like, I can send and ask his advice, but I fear I know what his answer will be."

"So do I," said Eirene resentfully. "This means that I must give up my portrait, then. But I must have a picture of yours," turning to Armitage. "I wonder"—she took up some of the sketches—"whether you would object to try a view of Hadgi-Antoniou from my description merely? I like the pictures of the Morean monasteries extremely, but as I have never seen them they do not appeal to me as Hadgi-Antoniou does."

"I will try my best, ma'am; but I fear the picture would not be very satisfactory. If you could give me just a rough sketch of your own——?"

"Unfortunately I can't draw at all. But I suppose I could show you roughly what it is like. I should like a picture of the church, but I know it would be hopeless for me to try to do that. The view must be from the ground below. Now you must not laugh at my crude efforts," as Armitage supplied her with a pencil and an unused sheet of paper. "The rock goes up, up, nearly straight, like this, and the monastery is at the very top, hanging over in some places. This is the rope and net by which visitors are drawn up. These things which look like caterpillars on the face

of the rock are ladders. The monks must have some more to bridge the gaps, but I never saw them in use, and I don't know where they keep them. Here at the edge of the summit are the monks' gardens. Don't expect me to draw bushes as you do." She was scribbling with intense energy, and Armitage, looking over her, read—

"They are here—Z. in pilgrims' rooms, M. in underground dungeon. Monks are divided into two parties, Greek and Thracian. Hegoumenos and Greeks friendly but timid. Thracians under Scythian orders. Greeks will yield to definite order from Œcumenical Patriarch for release of prisoners. Be prepared to bribe Thracians heavily, and to threaten, or even use, force. Be secret, or prisoners may be removed."

"This is an overhanging forest, ma'am, I presume?" asked Armitage. Eirene laughed consciously.

"Oh no, only bushes, and in some places grass."

"Then—pardon me—I think, perhaps, this kind of touch would express it better." He took the pencil, and wrote—

"Are you in danger? • Can we help you first?"

"I think I shall get you to give me some drawing lessons," said Eirene admiringly. "Is this it?" and she wrote—

"You can do nothing for me. I shall be taken back to Scythia. Show disappointment about the portrait."

"If I might venture to offer a suggestion, ma'am, bushes don't generally wear their branches on the

outside," said Armitage drily, taking the pencil again, and covering Eirene's writing with light and dark shading bearing a sufficient resemblance to foliage.

"I really must have some lessons," said she, with renewed admiration. "Chariclea, you are not to tell me that Dr Simovics would object to that."

"Alas, dearest Princess!" lamented Mme. Ladoguin, who was firm in a not unnatural determination to save herself the wear and tear of the perpetual surveillance any further visits from the artist would entail. "The doctor was most particular in ordering complete rest for mind and eye and hand."

"If I might have the honour of painting your portrait, ma'am," ventured Armitage, "I am sure I could manage so that you would find the sittings very little strain. Once we had settled on a characteristic attitude, you could move about as you liked."

"I knew it wouldn't be so bad," said Eirene triumphantly. "You hear, Chariclea?"

"How unfortunate I am, compelled to represent the doctor, and bear the odium of his measures!" cried Mme. Ladoguin distractedly. "I can only say as I did before, let us ask him, madame."

"I know what that means," said Eirene, with a pout. "A princess in disgrace is a very helpless person, Mr Armitage."

"You don't know what a disappointment it is to me, ma'am," he answered, while Madame Ladoguin made a deprecating movement. "I had hoped so much from the Duchess's introduction."

"When you see her you must tell her that it was not my fault," said Eirene, scribbling vigorously. "The rock is grey, the walls are white, the roofs red tiles, the bushes grey-green, the sky very blue. I have written the colour on each, so that you may

remember. There, Chariclea, what do you think of it?"

Madame Ladoguin viewed the work of art with a caustic eye.

"Indeed, madame, I fear I should hardly recognise Hadgi-Antoniou from your picture of it."

"Then you must make it right, Mr Armitage," said Eirene, rising. "Cure its defects instead of mine, if you please."

CHAPTER XX.

BRIBERY AND CORRUPTION.

"Now that you have your information," said Armitage, when he had recounted to Wylie what had passed during his audience of Eirene, "what do you think of doing?"

"There can't be much doubt about that. We must go to Czarigrad and get hold of the Patriarch. Panagiotis must go, I suppose, as he is the only one likely to have influence in that quarter, and I must go to keep him up to the mark when he gets discouraged."

"You won't exactly publish abroad the object of your journey, I suppose?"

"What do you take me for? We go to Czarigrad to stir up the Embassy, of course."

"And what is my part in the programme?"

"To stay here and keep an eye on Princess Eirene, I presume. She may manage to send us some further particulars. You are sure she is staunch?"

"Not a doubt of it, and wild to give what help she can, I should say. All right, I'll look out. But how if at the same time I make unostentatious preparations for a visit to Hadgi-Antoniou, for the purpose of painting a picture of it for the devout and orthodox Imperial Princess Eirene Theophanis? She gave me a commission for the outside, and said she would like

one of the church as well. They will probably grant me a passport all right, if you are known to be safe at Czarigrad, for it won't do to keep all Europeans away from Hadgi-Antoniou, or people will begin to think there's something wrong there. Sir Frank will back me up, too, when he has got you off his mind. Then you must cover up your tracks at Czarigrad, and come across, preferably by sea, and join me without passing through Therma. There's a little port called Myriaki where we could rendezvous comfortably, and at the worst I can leave one of my servants behind and take you in his place."

"You must have done a good deal of thinking between the Scythian Consulate and here," said Wylie drily.

"Ah, you don't know how my brain works when it's put to it. I'm bound to see this thing through now. How are you off for the wherewithal?"

"Oh, the Professor has just come into another quarter's income, and he's quite chirpy."

"That's all right for Czarigrad, but at Hadgi-Antoniou we may have to outbid the Scythian agent. I can raise anything up to a thousand—shall I do it?"

"I suppose it would be as well," said Wylie unwillingly. "It sounds awfully odd to hear you talking about 'we,'" he explained, rather ashamed of his coldness. "I seem to have let you in for a good deal, when you remember that the Smiths have nothing to do with you."

"Well, for the matter of that, they have nothing to do with you either, have they?" It was a mere accident of association that brought you together. Of course, you went through a lot in their company, but I hope I may do what little I can to help an English

lady in distress, though I haven't had the honour of being introduced to her."

"Right you are! You must think me a surly brute. I'm glad you have pulled me up—honestly I am. I suppose I might have gone on to wish the Smiths not to be rescued unless I had the chief hand in it."

"You shall have the chief hand in it, so far as it depends on me," said Armitage heartily. "After all you have done, it would be a black shame to rob you of the honour. I'm under your orders, remember, and you may be sure I shall say so. I'll get things ready here, while you do the Czarigrad part of the business, and then we'll meet and achieve our final *coup* in company."

There was no hesitation in Wylie's agreement, but during the next week or two he was inclined to consider that Armitage had chosen conspicuously the easier task. Nothing but iron resolution on his part would have dragged the Professor to Czarigrad, and kept him there when he had arrived. His dislike of approaching the Patriarch was so marked that Wylie began to suspect that the tales he had heard of the secret organisation of Greek bands in Emathia were true, and that the Professor intended to employ them to rescue Maurice by force, thus committing him to their cause, and them to his. But since the Professor vouchsafed no account of his plans, Wylie could only proceed with his own, which were not rendered easier of execution by the reluctance of the Patriarch and his *entourage* to do their part. There could be little doubt that Scythian agents had been beforehand with him, for it required weary days of waiting, and persistent refusals to depart, before he could gain a sight of any one in authority. By this time Professor Panagiotis seemed to have made up his mind to work

heartily with him, and they went together to the Patriarchal palace, where they were received by a kind of domestic chaplain, or clerical private secretary, a dark-robed, high-capped monk with a keen, astute face. Having heard their request, the secretary addressed himself to the Professor, 'apparently regarding him as the more reasonable being of the two.

"If you realised the state of the community at Hadgi-Antoniou, you would know that what you ask is impossible," he said. "Since the first Thracian monks were unfortunately admitted, under an agreement that their number was never to exceed one-fourth of the whole, they have steadily aimed at dominating the monastery. The agreement is still nominally in force, but certainly half the brethren must be Thracian, and in a year or two they will swamp the Greek element altogether. At present the community remains faithful to the Patriarchate because the Hegoumenos and other officials ~~are~~ Greeks, but should anything precipitate a collision between the two bodies, it is almost certain that they would be out-voted. To avoid such a collision is our perpetual aim. How, then, can you expect us, for the sake of a couple of unknown English tourists, to bring about the loss of an important outpost?"

"You would wink at murder, if you might keep your monastery?" asked Wylie. The monk shrugged his shoulders.

"Why ~~don't~~ you apply to your Embassy?" he asked.

"Because we know that before any demand for the release of the prisoners could be made effective, they would be carried away somewhere else, or handed over to one of the brigand bands to be murdered."

"We are alike, then," smiled the secretary. "You

will not do what you might, for fear of the consequences. Neither will we. There is no question of any immediate danger to your friends, I believe? Why trouble about them, then?"

Wylie rose angrily, but Professor Panagiotis laid a hand upon his sleeve. "We have not taken into consideration the fact that the prisoners are not unknown English tourists, but the heirs of the blessed John Theophanis," he said.

"The fact is curious, but no more," said the secretary, with a wooden face. "Living, as we do, under the tolerant and enlightened rule of the Grand Seignior, survivals of the kind you mention have no interest for us."

"In certain eventualities, it might be inconvenient for the Patriarchate if the heir of John Theophanis had a just cause of resentment against it," pursued the Professor.

"It is not ~~for~~ us to consider possible eventualities, but to maintain truth and loyalty in the present," was the answer, which filled Wylie with helpless fury. The Professor remained calm.

"Very well: we will consider the present alone. The only other heir is in the hands of the Scythians, pledged supporters of the schismatical Exarchate. Is it or is it not a matter of importance that a nearer heir should exist, attached by bonds of gratitude and affection to the Patriarchate, and capable of being brought forward whenever Scythia shows signs of asserting the claims of her candidate?"

"This sounds more businesslike," said the secretary approvingly. "You can answer for the young man's strict Orthodoxy?"

"I have myself instructed him, and the experiences he has since undergone at the hands of the schismatics

can hardly have attracted him to their cause. If the Patriarch intervened to rescue him, it would bind the youth to him indissolubly."

"The idea is good, but there are difficulties in the way of carrying it out. To give you an order directing the release of the prisoners would probably lead to their disappearance—we are surrounded by spies—and would certainly lose us the monastery. It must be in general terms. But even then you are too well known," to the Professor, "and I have been warned against this English gentleman, your companion, so that he also will be watched for. You must find some trustworthy agent, who may receive the Patriarchal letter, and do your business by its aid."

"Make it out in the name of Harold Armitage, an English painter, who is commissioned to obtain views of the monastery for the Princess Eirene Theophanis," said Wylie.

"The Scythian candidate? You are ingenious, monsieur, to make the devout purpose of the Princess contribute to her undoing. Well, the letter shall be prepared, and all possible assistance desired for Mr Armitage in his pious task. The rest of the business you must manage for yourselves."

He bowed them out, and as soon as they had crossed the threshold Wylie expressed his candid opinion of the Patriarchal surroundings. The Professor smiled grimly.

"When the Morean insurrection broke out, the Patriarch of the day was hanged at his own church door," he said. "We are not all ready to be martyrs nowadays."

Wylie said nothing, for the explanation was evidently all-sufficient in the Professor's eyes, but he wondered how much affection and gratitude Maurice

was expected to feel towards the Patriarchate, and whether too much had not been promised in his name.

The Patriarchal letter arrived next day, its preparation having been quickened by a discreet distribution of gifts among the persons concerned, and Wylie was able to carry out his plans. The Professor was to remain some days in Czarigrad, visiting the British Embassy daily, and apparently devoting all his energies to obtaining the release of the prisoners by its means, while Wylie took his departure in a small fast sailing-vessel for Myriaki. The boat was chartered by the Professor exclusively for this service, and Wylie suspected that it was not the first time he had employed it on secret errands, so knowing did the captain show himself with respect to ships and customs-stations which it was advisable to avoid. Arriving off Myriaki late one evening, Wylie, standing in the bows, raised and dipped a light three times. The signal was answered from the shore, and presently Armitage came off, brimming over with excitement.

"It's all right," he said. "You are my *cavass*, Spiridion Istriotis, and I have brought you a suit of his clothes. The real Spiro is remaining in the seclusion of the paternal mansion, on full wages, until I send him word. You had better get the things on before coming on shore, hadn't you? Your cabin is large enough to allow of that, though it certainly wouldn't hold us both at once."

"What about the passport?" demanded Wylie, as he made the change rapidly in his little shelter under the half-deck, while Armitage leaned against the bulk-head outside.

"Oh, that's the greatest joke! The *teskereh* they've given me would apply to you, or your friend Smith, or any mortal man, just as well as to me. I believe

they keep a form in stock with the description of an ideal Englishman—tall, fair hair, blue eyes, and so on—and simply copy it. It will really fit you best, for the eyes will be right, at any rate. What coloured eyes has Smith?"

"I don't know—ordinary, I suppose," growled Wylie, with whom the point was a sore one.

"Well, it can't be more unlike him than it is to me, so we ought all to be able to use the same passport, if we can bribe the police to look away while we pass it from one to the other. But you'll go as Spiro, of course, so you won't want it. Ready? I sculled myself off, to the great disapproval of the seafaring population on the quay, because I had something I wanted to say without eavesdroppers."

Wylie's possessions were transferred to the boat, and he bade farewell to the captain of the vessel, arranging with him to lie off Myriaki for the next fortnight. In the boat he took the oars, and Armitage pushed off. When they were about half-way to the shore, the artist produced a small but weighty parcel contained in a chamois-leather bag.

"Put that in the safest and best-hidden pocket you can find in Spiro's garments," he said. "It has two hundred and fifty pounds in English gold in it, and I have another just the same. I have scarcely dared to sleep since I left Therma. The rest of my money is in notes and cash of various fancy currencies peculiar to this delectable peninsula, and is contained in an imposing cash-box, which all my servants have been taught to regard with profound respect. But I thought it might be desirable to have a secret store in an attractive form, and I'm thankful to shift half the responsibility—and weight—off on you."

"Good man!" said Wylie, concealing the bag inside

his shirt, and securing it with his girdle, and they rowed to the quay, where Armitage was quartered in a villainous little Greek inn, having chosen it that he might be able to keep watch for the vessel. He had allowed it to become known that he was expecting the arrival of a special messenger with a letter from the Patriarch to assist him in his work at Hadgi-Antoniou, and Wylie was an object of intense veneration to the Greeks of the port, as he swaggered in front of Armitage, clearing the way as the absent Spiro would have done. A number of the notables of the place visited them after supper, anxious to enjoy the honour of beholding the outside of the Patriarchal letter, and one or two of the chief of them were allowed the supreme distinction of kissing it. In the morning they escorted the letter and its bearers some distance on their way, and parted from them the best of friends, amid much festive firing of guns.

Armitage had neglected no precaution for ensuring the success of his journey that the wisdom of many advisers in Therma could suggest to him. The four men whom he called servants were really guards, Mohammedan Illyrians, armed to the teeth, and faithful unto death until the job for which they were engaged was over, after which they would be quite ready to murder their late employer at the bidding of a new one. Their presence ensured a friendly reception whenever Roumis were met with, and the unofficial rulers of the country were recognised by a letter to the principal brigand chief in the district, who rejoiced in the name of Fido—a letter of safe-conduct obtained, for a consideration, from Fido's accredited agent in Therma. Armitage had not ventured to make any preparations that might suggest his intention of rescu-

ing the prisoners, but he calculated that by the time they reached Hadgi-Antoniou the stores would have diminished so much that there would be a mule for Zoe to ride coming back, and he had laid in a lavish provision of scented soap, handkerchiefs, and other minor luxuries, ostensibly for his own benefit.

The journey proved to be uneventful, for such trifling incidents as the frequent stopping of the cavalcade by bands of armed men could not be considered events when the exhibition—with due discrimination—of the Patriarchal letter, the brigand's safe-conduct, or the Roumi passport, according to circumstances, sufficed to close them. One of Armitage's precautions had been to provide a large store of sugar-candy and other sweets, and the unfriendliness of the most ferocious brigand or densest commissary of police was never proof against a gift from it. The arrival at Hadgi-Antoniou was the close of a triumphal progress, and Armitage and Wylie looked up at the monastery on its pillar of rock, and wondered whether the rest of their work was to be as easy.*

The firing of the rifles of the escort brought the monks, as usual, to their watch-tower, and questions and answers were bellowed up and down the cliff. The news that the English lord was the bearer of a letter from the Œcumenical Patriarch caused great excitement, and the net was let down at once. Wylie went up in it, lest the monks should refuse to admit him if Armitage went first. He was grabbed and hauled in as the prisoners had been, and while he waited for his friend to make the ascent he examined the tower and capstan with a keen eye. Armitage having been landed, rather pale and uncomfortable-looking, they were led first into the church, where the monks bowed to the ikons and chanted with extreme

rapidity a very brief service, which might have been intended either as a welcome to the visitors or a thanksgiving for their safe arrival. Wylie accepted it gratefully as the latter. He was once more within a few yards of his friends, after their long separation.

The old Hegoumenos, who had sent an apology for not welcoming the strangers immediately, was awaiting them in the guest-room, with his monks assembled round him. Armitage presented the Patriarch's letter, which the Hegoumenos kissed and laid to his forehead, and handed to Papa Athanasios to read. The artist's devout intention of painting pictures of the monastery for the illustrious Princess who had so lately been their guest was announced to the brethren with high commendation, and after the letter had been handed round for them to kiss, they retired. The last, and apparently the most reluctant to quit the room, was a grey-bearded man with a look of authority, who had been watching Wylie narrowly. When he had gone, a young and rather foolish-looking monk came back furtively and peered at the visitors, and they heard him saying something to his fellows outside. Papa Athanasios looked annoyed, but he also cast an inquisitive glance at Wylie.

"What are they saying?" asked Armitage.

"Oh, our younger brethren are foolish—they are like children, unaccustomed to strangers—there is a silly saying among them——" said the monk incoherently. "They do not often see any one like the English lord's *cavass*."

"But what is the saying? Is it an old one?"

"No, not very—in fact, it is only a few weeks old. The Scythian lord who came to escort the Princess to Therma bade one of our brethren beware of the man with blue eyes, and they think they have found

him. But this is foolishness. The Lord Hegoumenos desires to know what else he can do for you, since the sacred letter of the Universal Patriarch orders him to pleasure you not only in your devout purpose, but in other matters which you will confide to his ear."

But when Armitage had asked for the release of the two English prisoners, Papa Athanasios and the Hegoumenos looked at one another, puzzled, timid, and anxious. Then they began to explain in low tones that if it had depended on them, the prisoners would never have been detained, but that M. Kirileff had arranged matters with Papa Demetri, the treasurer of the monastery, and the only Thracian who had as yet attained office. Papa Demetri was a most wonderful treasurer, his two superiors confessed reluctantly; everything he touched seemed to turn to gold, and the monastic revenues had never been so elastic. The church was being entirely redecorated—this merely meant that the frescoes and ikons were being painted over in exactly the same forms and colours as before—and even the Greek brethren would support him through thick and thin for making such a thing possible. The reason for the wonderful advance of the Thracian element in the monastery was now clear to the listeners, but they could not bring themselves to point out to the two old monks that they were—however delicately the transaction might be disguised—selling their nationality for Scythian gold.

"Papa Demetri must be getting something out of Kirileff for this business," said Armitage to Wylie. "We must outbid him. Did the Scythian traveller make any gift to the monastery?" he asked of Papa Athanasios.

"He promised a very great gift, through Brother Demetri"—the monk named a sum which worked out

at about four hundred pounds. "The brethren have all been rejoicing because it will restore the *ikonostasis*, and complete the renewing of the church."

"If he only promised it, whether it was through prudence or because he hadn't it with him, it's a most lucky thing for us," said Wylie. "Offer them the five hundred down if they'll give the prisoners up at once."

But this was much too summary a suggestion. The matter must be laid before the monks in full conclave, it appeared, and they must choose between five hundred pounds certain and a possible four hundred. Wylie suggested that it might make the choice easier if they were not asked actually to release the prisoners, but only to leave their cells unlocked and unguarded, and the ladders on the face of the rock available for use. The capstan he did not venture to advise, since no one in the monastery could remain ignorant when it was being used. The idea seemed to remove much of the two old men's alarm, and the Hegoumenos announced quite cheerfully that he would call a conclave for the next day to consider the generous offer of the English lord.

"Can't you show us where the prisoners are?" asked Wylie of Papa Athanasios, as they paused in the courtyard, after leaving the guest-room, to allow Armitage to make a hasty sketch of a corner of the church. The old monk had already shepherded back the supposed *cavass*, gently but firmly, from so many unauthorised excursions into other buildings and courtyards, that he began to think M. Kirileff's warning not uncalled for, and he answered with some asperity—

"The lodging of the monastery's guests is no concern of yours."

"At least tell us how they are," entreated Wylie, and Papa Athanasios answered more gently—

"They are both in good health. I myself have allowed the youth to walk in the courtyard at hours when Brother Demetri thought him safely locked unto his cell, so eagerly did he entreat leave to smell the air, and I have talked much with him at other times. The girl is left to the charge of a devout woman, who has been much edified to behold her continually rapt in contemplation, so that, had she been Orthodox, she would have imagined her to be a seer of holy visions. One thing perturbed our sister greatly—that her prisoner made many strange signs on her wall with a nail, which she feared might be unholy spells. So much was she troubled, that on a certain feast-day—was it Holy Trinity or Holy John? I forget—I allowed the girl also to walk in the garden, and examined the marks for myself. But there was nothing evil in them; they were such foolish and meaningless scrawls as might be made by one distraught, and I quieted our sister's mind with this assurance."

Armitage was laughing involuntarily, but to Wylie the thought of Zoe enjoying a glimpse of liberty on Trinity Sunday, unconscious that her scribbles were being scrutinised for evidences of witchcraft, was pure pathos, and he turned away abruptly.

CHAPTER XXI.

“THERE’S MANY A SLIP——”

THE conclave was held, and despite the strenuous efforts of Papa Demetri, the monks decided by a large majority to accept Armitage’s offer, and wink at the escape of the prisoners. Had M. Kirileff paid down his two thousand five hundred roubles, the monastery would have been bound in honour to fulfil his conditions, as the aged Papa Apostolos pertinently observed, but since he had merely promised it, and had not so far fulfilled his promise, it would be folly to refuse an additional sum which would allow the silver-gilt haloes of the saints on the *ikonostasis* to be replaced by plates of pure gold. And, after all, they were not asked to promote the prisoners’ escape; it was merely a matter of leaving the ladders down for a few nights instead of drawing them up, and of a temporary mislaying of his keys by Papa Athanasios. It was also arranged—the suggestion came from Brother Nikola, the vacuous-faced young monk who had identified Wylie—that the escape should not take place until Armitage had finished his picture of the church, lest the Princess Eirene should be disappointed of her devout desires. The good news was carried by Papa Athanasios to Armitage, who was diligently at work in the courtyard, and he conveyed it to Wylie, whose

indiscreet behaviour the day before, coupled with M. Kirileff's warning, had caused him to be denied further admittance. He bore the monks no ill-will for his exclusion, since Brother Evangelos, who was in charge of the ladders, was authorised to show him how they were managed, and he spent the afternoon of the day of the conclave in crawling up and down the cliff-face like a fly on a wall. The next evening, however, when Armitage descended in the net after a long day's work, Wylie met him and drew him aside from their camp.

"Those venerable frauds at the top there are up to some mischief," he said.

"How? what do you mean?" asked Armitage.

"Fellow came down the ladders this morning with a basket—apparently a lay-brother going to the village for provisions. It struck me he seemed to look about him a good deal, as if he was afraid of being followed, so I promptly followed him, stalking him through the brushwood on hands and knees. It was just as I expected. When he had got well out of sight of our camp, he put down his basket, tucked up his gown, and scampered off as hard as he could in the opposite direction from the village. I tried to follow him, but as I didn't dare to stand upright he distanced me easily, so I took cover near his basket to see when he came back. He was about an hour gone, then he came and picked up his basket again, and went off to the village as jauntily as you please."

"But where do you think he went?"

"Clearly to some one who acts as go-between for Papa Demetri and the Scythians—probably a brigand. The village is Greek, you see, so they would have to look elsewhere. Of course, the plan is to fetch Kirileff back with larger offers before we can get away. I

distrusted that stipulation about your finishing the picture, you know. When are you likely to get it done?"

"Not for a good many years, if the monks are to be the judges. They expect a regular Byzantine arrangement, showing every stone in the walls and every tile that's missing from the roof. They aren't educated up to modern methods, you see, and I'm putting as much detail into it as I conscientiously can, just to please them. Still, with another day's work I ought to be able to produce a daub that will pass, at any rate."

"That's all right. We couldn't start to-night, anyhow. I am going up the ladders when it's dark, so as to know my way about them. I couldn't undertake to get Miss Smith down without. It's a bad enough climb to take a woman anyhow, and in the dark——! But perhaps that's just as well, since she won't see what it's like."

"I wish I had your cool head. I suffer agonies every time I go up and down in the net, even. By the bye, to avoid further artistic controversy with the brethren, can you make a drawing, roughly to scale, of the place for me to-morrow, from the ground, and jot down the colours, so that I can paint from it afterwards? They're so full of the church that they haven't remembered the outside view yet, but Papa Demetri is quite capable of making use of it to delay us."

"All right. It'll be very rough, but that won't signify. Meanwhile, you tip the wink to Papa Athanasios to lose his keys before locking-up time to-morrow night, will you?"

Only one incident occurred to trouble the con-

spirators during the following day, and this was a mishap to Brother Evangelos, who, in passing through a dark passage, tripped over one of the crutches on which the monks supported themselves during the long services, and sprained his ankle so severely that he could not leave his cell. But Wylie had ascended and descended the ladders safely during the night, and was confident that he knew his way from one to the other, so that there seemed no reason for delay. Papa Athanasios had warned Maurice to be ready when the *semantron* sounded for midnight service, and the judicious gift of a rosary from the Holy Mountain had induced old Marigo to convey the same message to Zoe. A dark robe and high cap, such as were worn by the monks, had also been smuggled into the cell of each, in case any belated brother, hurrying into church, should run across the two strangers.

Wylie was half-way up the ladders when the clangour of the *semantron* smote upon his ear, and he climbed the rest of the way in entire forgetfulness of the perilous nature of his path. The sound was still reverberating through the monastery when he reached the tower to which the ladders led, and he could see the last-awakened among the monks scurrying through the courtyard. Presently the noise died away, the brother who had been wielding the mallet followed the rest into church, and Wylie went softly across to the quarters of the Hegoumenos and laid upon his divan the second packet containing two hundred and fifty pounds, the first having been handed over as soon as the result of the conclave was declared. Then he returned to the shelter of his tower, and waited with beating heart, not daring to make his presence known, even when two figures appeared round the end of the church, for in the monkish garb it was

impossible to distinguish who they were. But they came unhesitatingly straight to the tower, and stepping out from the doorway to meet them, he grasped a hand of each and led the way to the ladder, sternly silencing their eager questions. Without giving them time to consider the means by which they were to descend, he went a few steps down, with his face to the ladder, then told Zoe to follow him, and guided her feet to the steps, which were by no means evenly placed. Maurice came last, well behind Zoe, that she might have full liberty to cling to the sides of the ladder, and thus they worked their way down, the cold sweat standing on Wylie's brow. The camp fire looked so small and so distant below—almost as distant as the great clear stars, which seemed unnaturally bright in that cloudless atmosphere. Had Maurice alone been in question, he would have faced the adventure with a laugh, but that Zoe should be hanging between heaven and earth on that rickety ladder, with the night-wind whistling round her, was something unspeakably horrible. His feet seemed like lead, and he could hardly feel the next rung as he moved down to it, but Zoe distinguished no trembling as he guided her slowly lower and lower. She followed his muttered directions as if in a dream, for the imaginary world in which she had spent the greater part of her captivity still lay about her, and it was as though her mind received and her body obeyed his orders, while her real self was not there at all.

At last they came to a ledge of rock, on which Wylie allowed a rest from sheer necessity, for he found himself forced to cling to the ladder even when standing on firm ground. But no sooner had Zoe's feet touched the rock than an exclamation from her turned his nerves to iron again.

"What's that?" she cried. "There's some one here! Something high and dark went round the corner."

Neither Wylie nor Maurice, with their faces to the ladder, had seen anything, but she had turned her head to see where Wylie was, and she persisted that in that moment some one who had been standing close to him had vanished. Peering round the corner, they could see nothing, but Wylie drew a revolver as he led the way along the path which formed the link between this ladder and the next. Still there was no one to be seen, and he returned the weapon to his sash before stooping to feel for the head of the ladder. All along the brink he groped without success before the truth dawned upon him. The ladder was not there. It was not a very long one, but it crossed slantwise a deep chasm in the rock, which offered an insurmountable obstacle to any one trying to ascend the cliff without it.

"The ladder is gone," he said, turning to the other two, and hoping that his voice did not betray his feelings. "We must let ourselves down. Take off those monks' gowns you have on. They will have to do for ropes."

They obeyed, and Wylie slit the long shapeless garments in two from neck to hem with his dagger, then tied the halves together by their huge sleeves, and the two gowns to one another. "I'll go first," he said, "and you had better both hang on to the rope, for it'll be a big strain."

They obeyed, not understanding how he meant to get across; but to their horror, when he had let himself down over the edge, the rope began to oscillate violently. He had fastened the end round his waist, so as to leave his hands free, and he was doing his

utmost to swing across the chasm. Again and again his efforts fell short, and he swung back bruised; but at last, with a wild clutch, he caught hold of the bushes growing on the other side, and hauled himself up.

"Now, Miss Smith," he said breathlessly, "recall your gym. days at school. Do you think you can come down this rope hand over hand?"

Zoe would have died sooner than confess to inability or fear at that moment, though the clumsy knotted cable had little resemblance to a gymnasium-rope. "Rather!" she said promptly, and Wylie twisted the end he held round and round, so as to make the bridge as strong as possible. Sliding down it was out of the question, on account of the knots, and she saw that she must work her way along. Maurice put his end of the rope under the largest stone he could find, as an added security against slipping, then, bracing himself firmly, held it as taut as he could. Zoe gripped it with hands and feet, thankful for the flexible moccasins, which were so much more serviceable than shoes, and dropped slowly from knot to knot, descending diagonally until Wylie, standing on his end of the rope, was able to catch her in his arms. She stood aside, panting, while he asked Maurice whether the stone was large enough to balance his weight.

"Nothing like," was the reply. "I shall jump. In case I miss, I shall tie the rope round my waist, and you must pull me up. Zoe had better hold on to it as well, for fear the jerk might drag you over. Stand clear."

Wylie and Zoe stood well back, and waited for the shock, but Maurice had judged his distance so well that though he did not land on the rock where they were standing, he was able to grasp the bushes which grew below it, and before they could give way, Wylie had him by the hand. The bushes afforded sufficient

foothold to enable him to raise himself over the edge of the rock, and winding the rope round him in case it should be needed again, he followed the other two to the head of the next ladder. This was duly in place, and they began to descend it in the same order as before, but about midway Wylie's heart stood still. What if the unknown enemy who had removed the second ladder should have sawn through the supports of this one? He said nothing to his friends, and they went on steadily until they reached the foot of this ladder, and passed through a hole cut in the rock to the head of a fourth. This also was passed in safety, and they stood on a rocky platform, extending some way into the rock in the form of a cave. This was only some hundred and fifty feet above the ground, and the rope-ladder was hanging from its two iron stanchions ready for their descent.

"I say," said Maurice, "I don't like the look of this cave. We can't very well search it without a light, for any one hiding in it could see us against the stars, but if Zoe's phantom is there, he might think it rather a good dodge to cut the ladder while we were all on it. You take Zoe down first, Wylie, and I'll stay on guard until you are safe down."

"All right," said Wylie. "Take my revolver, and don't hesitate to shoot. I wonder if Armitage is down below?"

He whistled softly, and an answering whistle came up, while the limp, dangling ladder became firm. Once again Zoe was thankful for her moccasins, for it was much more nervous work descending the loose rungs of rope than those of the wooden ladders. Wylie guided her feet as before, and slowly and steadily they came nearer to the darkness which meant firm ground. She had kept up valiantly hitherto, but when it came to the

last step she could not induce herself to take it. She seemed to have been crawling down shaking ladders for unnumbered hours, and she clung shivering to the ropes, utterly unable to quit her hold. Wylie unclasped her hands gently at last, and lifted her down, saying, in a commonplace, society voice which dried up her threatening tears, "I want to introduce my friend Armitage, Miss Smith. You have to thank him for getting you out, for he wasn't suspected as I was."

"Awfully glad to see you safe on firm ground," said Armitage. "I'm afraid you'll find things rather rough, but if you'll kindly put up with it——"

"We should like to have brought a whole outfit, and a lady's-maid, and all sorts of Eastern luxuries for you," said Wylie, who was holding the ladder steady for Maurice to descend; "but we were afraid of rousing suspicion. As your sister—I mean Princess Eirene—isn't here, may I say that you must think you are on active service?"

Zoe had been laughing rather nervously, but the question roused her to recollection. "Oh," she cried, "have you brought me any note-books?"

"No, really, I'm afraid not," said Wylie, dismayed. "Why?"

"Oh, I have been giving the most splendid story all the time I have been in the monastery, and I wanted to write it down before I forget. I know it will all fade when I get with other people."

Her tone spoke of such complete absorption in the story that Wylie was conscious of a jealous feeling that the absence of the note-books was not an unmixed misfortune.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said hypocritically. "We'll bring you cartloads of note-books as soon as we get to Th——"

An exclamation from Armitage broke into his sentence. Above, on the edge of the rocky platform, a high cap and a bearded face were momentarily outlined against the starry sky, and something shining caught the light. One side of the ladder seemed to drop, and the rungs hung drooping. Wylie felt for his revolver, but it was in Maurice's sash as he clung half-way down the ladder, and before Armitage could thrust his into his hand, the remaining side-rope parted with a sound like the report of a gun, and Maurice seemed to fly outwards through the air. He came to the ground with a thud which drew an agonised shriek from Zoe, and Wylie scarcely doubted that he must be killed. He was unconscious when they reached him, but as they were anxiously feeling his limbs, he opened his eyes for a moment.

"Broken, I think," he said, as Armitage touched his right arm, and Wylie confirmed the opinion.

"Well, better than a leg," said Maurice feebly. "You'd have had to leave me here if it had been that."

"Nonsense, we'd have rigged you up a cacolet, and carried you on a baggage-mule," said Wylie, examining into the extent of the injury by the light of the vestas which Armitage struck. "You may think yourself jolly lucky if this is all that's wrong with you, Smith. I can manufacture some splints and strap it up, but if it had been an elbow, or a compound fracture of any sort, it would have been beyond me. Now, can you get to the camp if we help you along?"

Maurice set his teeth, and submitted to be helped up and supported as far as the tents, where Zoe, much to her indignation, was ruthlessly ordered to rest for an hour or so, on the ground of having gone through quite enough already. In vain she recalled her possession

of First Aid certificates, Wylie was adamant, and even the ungrateful Maurice entreated her to go and lie down and not make a fuss. When she was called, in the early morning, the arm was set, and Maurice, though pale and in considerable pain, was quite ready to start. Wylie gave up his horse to him and walked at his side, and Zoe was mounted, as had been arranged, on the mule. What the guards thought of the additions to the party no one knew, for they asked no questions and made no remarks, and all went smoothly. There was one disagreeable moment during the day, when a peripatetic police official, travelling with an escort, was encountered. He accepted with enthusiasm the assurance that Maurice and Zoe were the two famous Europeans whose capture and detention by brigands had produced such a stir, and immediately afterwards declared his intention of arresting them for travelling in the interior of the country without a passport. Asked what he intended to do with them, he replied that it was his duty to conduct them immediately to the nearest port, whereupon he was assured that they were going thither as fast as they could. To this he rejoined that he felt it right to escort them there, and as his room, and that of his ragged regiment, was infinitely to be preferred to his company, it was clear that an attempt must be made to overcome his sense of duty. The means of doing this was simple, but expensive, and to the last it was doubtful whether his affection for the travellers would not lead him to attach himself to them as long as they had anything left that commended itself to his fancy. They succeeded in freeing themselves from him, however, and the rest of the return journey was as uneventful as that from the coast had been. Maurice bore the travelling well, and he and Zoe took unfeigned

delight in the open-air life after four weeks within stone walls.

The only person who was not satisfied was Wylie. He had accomplished the object to which all his efforts had been bent, he had the society of his friends again, but the reality was not equal to the anticipation. Zoe and he were not close comrades, as they had been in the early days of their captivity. Sometimes he tried to look at the fact from a common-sense point of view, deciding that Maurice's accident was enough to account for the change, but at other times he told himself bitterly that it was all his own fault for forgetting the note-books. Of course, Zoe must think that he was utterly and wilfully indifferent to the things that interested her. It was so unfair, too, for though, like most men of his type, he had little fancy for any woman with whom he had to do "mixing herself up with writing," he was sure that Zoe could not have discovered this. He had acquiesced in the jesting, matter-of-fact way in which she chose to allude to her literary efforts, and had even congratulated himself that the taste could not be very deep-rooted. And now this wretched story of hers was coming between them, he was sure of it. When she rode for an hour in silence, and had to be recalled to her present surroundings with a start, he knew she was living in that world of hers in which he had no part. It did not affect his feelings towards her. If she chose to write novels all day and every day, he would accept the fact, and prize the results, however little he could enter into them, because they were hers, but the sense of aloofness came from her side. As she had put it to herself after their parting in the forest, she had been learning to do without him, and with her mind preoccupied with her story, she had found it easy.

CHAPTER XXII.

UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS.

"I AM so dreadfully worried about Maurice," said Zoe, meeting Wylie in the courtyard of the Professor's villa at Kallimeri, to which they had come immediately on reaching Therma by sea from Myriaki.

"Why, is the arm worse? I thought that Greek doctor was too complimentary to my surgery. Shall I ride in and find a European surgeon and bring him out?"

"No, I don't think it's that. I can't help fancying Maurice must have got a touch of fever the night we lay off the harbour. He is worrying about Eirene, and says that he feels she's in some great danger. That sort of thing is so unlike Maurice—thought-transference and things of that kind, I mean—and I think he must be ill. He talks of going into Therma himself and insisting on seeing her, and you know the doctor said he was to keep perfectly quiet. I suppose they may be carrying Eirene off to Scythia, but I don't see how he knows about it. At any rate I'm sure he's not fit to go and contend with all the obstacles they would put in his way at the Scythian Consulate."

"Well, I'm not exactly a favoured visitor there myself, and it's pretty clear that Armitage isn't either,

since they have sent back his pictures without even undoing them."

"Oh, I hadn't heard that," said Zoe.

"They arrived this morning, with a note from Mme. Ladoguin to say that the duplicity of Armitage's behaviour since his audience of her had so shocked the Princess that she considered herself released from any obligation to him. They have found out what happened at Hadgi-Antoniou, you see. I suppose Papa Demetri's messenger got through just too late for them to stop us."

"I wonder if it would be any good my going?" mused Zoe. "I scarcely like leaving Maurice for a whole day, but——"

"You musn't think of it. You don't imagine that if they let you in it would be for any good? The next thing we should find out would be that you were smuggled away to Scythia, and we should have to begin the hunt all over again."

Zoe laughed. "Perhaps if I wrote a note to Eirene, they would let her answer it," she said. "I suppose Maurice would be satisfied if he knew she was well, and not utterly miserable. You don't think she has started already, do you?"

"There was nothing of that kind in the note, and they could just as well have said that the pictures had arrived too late, if they wanted to snub Armitage. Well, shall I ride in with the note, and do my best to get it into the Princess's hands? More I can't promise, but it's just possible that they won't be looking out for me now, and I may manage to see her."

"I don't like giving you so much trouble——"

"It's no trouble. In fact, I must have gone in to-day or to-morrow to report to Sir Frank Francis, who has done what he could for us all along, in a blunder-

ing, slow-coach, civilian sort of way. He's a good old chap. The Professor has been talking of going in too, to see the Vali. He believes he's on the track of a Thraco-Dardanian conspiracy to destroy all the Greek and Roumis in Emathia at one fell swoop, so he's naturally excited, and thinks he'll make the Vali so too." Wylie spoke lightly, for his pride had imposed upon him the expediency of treating Zoe as she treated him. If she did not care to remember the days in which they had faced death and hardship together, he was quite willing to behave as a mere ordinary acquaintance. He would serve her in any possible way—that much his love for her demanded of him—but he would not court rebuff by exhibiting his feelings. The natural result of this course of conduct was that Zoe, missing something in his manner which she liked, while objecting to what it implied, began to make delicate experiments for the purpose of ascertaining how far she could go. She declined now to be drawn aside from the topic she had started.

"It doesn't seem fair that you should always be running errands for us. We seem to have annexed you altogether. How is it you haven't had to go back to India yet?"

"Got an extension of leave," said Wylie, unmoved. "Always glad to make myself useful when I can, you know. Well, if you will write that note, I'll find out whether the Professor is going into town, and go without him if he isn't. I should think we shall spend the night at his house, and come out to-morrow, which will give me a little more time to besiege the Princess."

"I don't know how I shall keep Maurice quiet all day," sighed Zoe.

"Oh, he'll be all right when he knows some one is trying to see her. Are you going to ask her to come out?"

"Oh, not in the note. They would never let it reach her. But if you see her, you might suggest that she should spend a day here. The Professor knew her father, you know. Of course, Madame Ladoguin must come too, but I'll manage her."

"You will be the first person that ever did that," said Wylie, as he went off to find his host.

Professor Panagiotis was quite willing to accept him as a companion, and they rode off early in the afternoon. At the Professor's house in the town they separated, the Professor going to the Konak to seek an interview with the Roumi Governor, and Wylie to the British Consulate. Sir Frank was busy, but asked him to come to dinner that evening and tell his story afterwards, and he went on at once to the Scythian Consulate, where the comedy of which he had formerly grown so tired recommenced. Servant after servant poured forth floods of eloquence in the attempt to convince him that the Princess was indisposed, that she received no one, that she was out driving, that she was preparing for her journey to Scythia, that he might safely leave the note to be delivered to her. This Wylie declined, and asked for an interview with Madame Ladoguin, which was denied him, and he put the note back into his pocket, and took up his old position opposite the Consulate. Here he remained until it was very nearly dark, without seeing the ladies return, so that it became pretty clear that one of the excuses, at any rate, was false. He quitted his post reluctantly, and finding that he had barely left himself sufficient time to go back and dress for dinner, called a cab to take him to the Professor's house.

He had scarcely departed when the great gates were thrown open, and Madame Ladoguin and Eirene drove out. They were going to dine at the Hercynian Consulate, one of the "safe" houses where there was no fear of meeting any meddling English people. Even in cases like this, however, Madame Ladoguin insisted on the list of guests being submitted to her beforehand, representing that the Princess was very strict on such points of etiquette, and refused to waive them even when paying visits, as at present, under a partial *incognito*. There was a cloud on Madame Ladoguin's brow. Wylie's unexpected reappearance had much perturbed her, and she scented a deep-laid scheme for carrying off Eirene before she could be safely removed to Scythia. She had sent anxious messages to her husband and brother to ask them to come to her before starting, but M. Ladoguin had been out all the afternoon, discussing with his fellow-Consuls the alarming rumours which were prevalent in the town of impending revolutionary movements, and Nicetas Mitsopoulo was still away on one of his mysterious errands. As a last resource, Madame Ladoguin ordered her coachman to stop at a club much frequented by the European representatives, in the hope of finding her husband there, intending to send him to complain to Sir Frank Francis that his troublesome fellow-countryman was renewing his intolerable persecution of the Princess.

M. Ladoguin was at the club, but his wife would not have him summoned to speak to her. Apologising to Eirene, she left the victoria and went into the hall, where her charge could not hear what was said. Eirene, left alone, looked out indifferently down the brightly lighted street. Here, in the European quarter, thanks to the efforts of the consular body, paving and

lighting conformed to Western rather than Eastern standards. Next door to the club towered the dark bulk of a building, which she knew to be the Seignorial Bank, now closed for the night, but something moving on its steps attracted her attention. It was difficult to see what it was in the shadow, but she thought that a porter must be laying down his burden there while he rested. At this moment her thoughts were distracted by a cab, which drove up furiously, its wheels almost grazing those of the carriage, and by the bad language which ensued between the driver and the consular *cavass*. Then—it all happened in a moment—the houses seemed to reel, she was thrown violently forward, and the air was filled with the sound of a tremendous explosion. The frightened horses went off like the wind, further terrified by the crash of falling fragments of masonry which came hurtling through the air. Eirene crouched dazed at the bottom of the carriage, face and shoulders cut and bruised by the stony shower. The sound of fresh explosions showed her that she was not deafened, but she could not hear the coachman's voice calling to his horses, and guessed that he had been thrown from the box. At the same moment she became aware that she was in pitch darkness. Her first horrified thought was that she had been struck blind, but as she looked up through the tattered hood of the carriage she saw a jet of flame soar into the sky, and realised that whoever had caused the explosions must also have cut off the gas supply of the town. The horses had now turned out of the foreign quarter into one of the native streets, as she could tell by the way the carriage swayed and bumped over the cobbles, and it was a marvel to her that it was not every moment upset, as the wheels now collided with a post and now grazed a projecting shop-front.

The air was full of shrieks and cries, still punctuated by an occasional explosion, and there was a distant sound which she thought must be firing. Sitting helpless, as the maddened horses tore along, she analysed probabilities with a calmness that surprised herself, and wondered whether the wild race would end in the waters of the harbour or in one comprehensive smash. Then there happened something that struck her with greater horror than all that had gone before. She had raised herself to the front seat, and kneeling, was trying to look out ahead to see where she was going, when a black figure gained the box with a mad spring, and seizing the whip, lashed the horses on. By the glare in the sky she could see that it wore the high cap and flowing robes of a monk, with unkempt hair and beard. They dashed on into another street, which Eirene had a vague idea belonged to the Moslem quarter, and peering out she saw a dark mass of people in front. She shrieked to them to stop the horses,* but they did not understand, and scattered to let the carriage through. This brought it opposite a large building, and the man on the box, dropping the whip, stood upright and hurled something with all his strength. The explosion that followed was no surprise to Eirene; it seemed to her that she waited for the sound. The building appeared to crumple up, and the horses sprang forward again with a jerk, which threw the monk from the box; but a minaret at the side fell across the street, and they could not face the ruin which came crashing down. Driven on by the shouts from behind, they dashed at the obstacle formed by the heap, turned when they found themselves thwarted, and dragged the carriage violently round, with one wheel high on the stones. Eirene had just sufficient presence of mind to spring clear as it went over, and to crouch

against the houses on one side while the horses kicked and struggled furiously to free themselves. One succeeded, and rushed wildly down the street, but the other, which had fallen and was entangled in the harness, tried in vain to raise itself from the ground.

Seeing that the danger was past, the people behind came running up, and Eirene found herself dragged from her shelter. The monk had disappeared, and, to her horror, she perceived that the mob evidently took her for the person who had destroyed their mosque. They were all Moslems, armed with knives and daggers, and they poured blood-curdling imprecations upon her as she stood surrounded by a ring of steel. In every language she knew she entreated them to take her back to the Consulate, or merely to let her go, but no one would listen, or seemed to understand. She tore off her rings and the diamond stars from her hair and threw them among them, then her pearl necklace—not the historic necklace which had been given up to the brigands, but a less valuable one which had been sent on into safety in the jewel-case after the railway accident. The string snapped as she pulled it off, and she caught the pearls in her hands and offered them to the mob if they would let her go, but in vain. They forced her hands open, and fought for the pearls, but never so eagerly as to leave a gap by which she could escape. She would have given even the girdle of Isidora as the price of her life if she had had it with her, but it was reposing safely at the Consulate.

After the first moment it gave her no comfort that she was not cut to pieces at once, for she guessed from the gestures of her assailants that while some of them advocated this course, others were proposing to take her into one of the houses and torture her in order

to discover her accomplices. In another moment she must have fainted from sheer horror, when the prostrate horse, which every one had forgotten, created a diversion by struggling to its feet and lashing out furiously, clearing a space round it. Seeing her chance, she tore herself from the men who held her, leaving her cloak in their hands, and sprang up the heap of rubbish which blocked the road. She could never have crossed it in cold blood, for the foothold was insecure, and the projecting pieces of rough stone and jagged wood caught her clothes and tore her hands; but she descended like a thunderbolt into a second crowd which had collected on the farther side, and burst through them before they could understand the agonised shouts which reached them from her defrauded captors.

Gathering her long skirt over her arm that it might not impede her movements, she ran headlong down the street, slipping on the horrible cobbles. Very soon she heard the hue and cry after her, and knew she must quickly be overtaken, for her high-heeled shoes caught in the treacherous interstices between the stones and nearly threw her down. Passing the mouth of another street, a desperate expedient suggested itself. The door of the first house stood open, and she slipped inside, hearing her pursuers rage by. As soon as the last was past the door, she crept out, and ran down the side street, more slowly now, for one shoe had lost its heel, and she could only get on with difficulty. Before she reached the end of the street she heard the shouts of the mob growing nearer again, and knew that they must have discovered her evasion. Two narrow passages between overhanging houses were before her, and she darted down the nearest, which was unsavoury to a degree. It ended at last, and she came out on a

wide open space, surrounded by squalid hovels, the outlines of which were just discernible by the dull glare in the sky. Panting, she paused for a moment, took off the shoe which still possessed a heel, and tried vainly to hammer it off with a stone. It was beyond her efforts, and she pushed back her hair, tied her handkerchief across her face below the eyes, so that it hung down like an Egyptian face-veil, and turned the skirt of her evening gown over her head, hoping that she might pass for a Roumi woman, whose veil would be a safeguard to her in the event of meeting any Moslem. Happily for her peace of mind, it did not occur to her that the frills of silk and lace at the edge of the lining would betray her at once, and she began to limp across the open space, which she recognised as the remains of a Roman amphitheatre which forms one of the sights of Therma.

She had scarcely emerged from the shadow of the houses when she heard footsteps behind her. She stopped, but they came on, and she broke into a feeble run, hearing the footsteps following and coming nearer. She thought she heard a voice, but she drew the skirt more closely over her head and tottered on, until the treacherous heel caught in something and she fell. The footsteps approached at a run, and she shut her eyes and waited for death.

"I'm awfully sorry I frightened you," said a voice in English. "Can I help you in any way?"

The revulsion of feeling was so great that Eirene crouched helplessly where she had fallen, and looked up at her questioner. With a gasp of relief, such as she had never expected to feel in the circumstances, she recognised the blue eyes bent upon her.

"Oh, Captain Wylie!" she sobbed.

"Why, who is it?" he asked, helping her up.

"Is it possible — not Miss Eirene? — I mean the Princess."

"Oh, yes," she cried, pulling off the handkerchief; "and there is a crowd trying to kill me, and I can't get away. Oh, what shall I do?"

"Gently," said Wylie, drawing her back into the shadow of the houses. "Are you hurt? You seemed to walk lame."

"It's my shoes. I have only one heel left." She took off the shoe, and he amputated the offending heel with his knife.

"I can't promise to get you back to the Consulate," he said, steering her across the corner of the open space, "for most of the outrages have taken place in the foreign quarter, and the troops are out, and firing wild. I like the Roumis generally, but to-night I must confess I would as soon meet a mob as soldiers. It's natural enough after what has happened."

"But what has happened?" cried Eirene. "Did some one blow up the Seignorial Bank?"

"Yes, and a good many other places as well. I gave up trying to count the explosions at last. I am staying with Professor Panagiotis, and was driving back to his house when the first explosion came and the gas failed. My driver refused to take me any farther, saying the Professor's house would certainly be one of those blown up. I tried to get there the nearest way on foot, but there were troops pursuing imaginary revolutionists in all the foreign streets, and too many bullets were flying about for the atmosphere to be healthy."

"But are we going to the Professor's house now? What is the good, if it's blown up?"

"I have no reason to think that it is. As far as I can see, the outrages have been mostly directed

against foreign buildings. I suppose the malcontents are displaying their disgust and contempt for the reforms forced on the Grand Seignior by the Powers. At any rate, as the Professor's guest, I should be more likely to find shelter in the Greek quarter than elsewhere."

"But why do you say the troops are shooting imaginary revolutionists? Who do you think threw the bombs? There was a monk who jumped up on the carriage—oh, it was terrible!"

"Agents of the Thraco-Dardanian Committees, certainly, but I don't think they will wait to be shot. They will have provided for their escape, and it's only poor wretched passers-by, who have nothing to do with the outrages, and are too terrified to get away, that will suffer in this moment of panic."

"But how can I go to the Professor's?" asked Eirene, her thoughts returning to her own situation, as, clinging to Wylie's arm, she traversed the deserted streets.

"Well, I should think it was better than staying out of doors," returned Wylie grimly. "I shall be thankful if we can get there."

There was a significance in his tone which she did not at first understand, for his trained ear had caught sooner than she did the regular tramp of soldiers, disentangling it from the confusion of sounds which still filled the air—not close at hand, for the shuttered houses might have been the abodes of the dead, but coming from the quarter they were approaching. Reaching the corner of a street, Wylie peered round it cautiously, and drew Eirene back with an exclamation.

"There's a detachment of the troops who are clearing the streets coming this way. There! they've got some poor devil," as the sound of a volley and a

piercing shriek rent the air. "Stand in this doorway. They may go straight on and not see us."

Eirene shrank as far into the shelter of the doorway as she could, and Wylie stood in front of her, concealing her as much as possible.

"They've got the jumps badly, and are firing at everything they see. That's the worst of it," he said over his shoulder. "If I go down, you must try to make them understand what an enormity they've committed in firing on a European, and invoke Sir Frank Francis till all is blue."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A FUSION OF INTERESTS.

THE soldiers came down the street talking loudly and excitedly, for the bonds of discipline were evidently relaxed. Every now and then a stray shot told that one of them thought he had seen a figure lurking in the shadow, and was taking the surest way of making things safe. The fitful beams of an old and inefficient lantern wavered from side to side as the leading man swung it towards each doorway in turn, but the light was so feeble that Wylie, standing rigid in his corner, almost hoped not to be seen. But his tweed clothes stood out against the dark and greasy stonework of the porch, and as the beam fluttered over him a voice called, "There's a man hiding in that door!" Instantly the ready rifles were focussed upon him, and even before he could step forward two or three random shots struck the stonework and splattered up the dust at his feet, but these were only due to nervous men with twitching fingers. Before the order could be given to fire, his voice rang out, "Cease firing!" in Roumi, and, taken by surprise, the soldiers obeyed. He seized his opportunity, and called out that he was English, and demanded their protection as far as the British Consulate.

"Why, it is a dog of a Christian, after all!" said one.

"If he did not throw the bombs, he stirred up the rascals to do it," said another.

"And what is he doing here, anyhow?" demanded a third.

"Discovered under suspicious circumstances," growled the sergeant. "He can't do any harm dead."

"He can do you a lot of harm when his body is found, you old fool!" said Wylie vigorously. The sergeant jumped.

"Here! give me the lantern," he said, and taking it from the man who held it, swung it so that the light fell on Wylie's face. "Why, it is the Bimbashi Bey with the cruel eyes, who gave us cigarettes when we were up in the north three months ago!" he cried. "He is a good man, Christian or not. Let there be no more talk of shooting him. What does the Bimbashi Bey desire?"

"Can you get us to the Consulate?" asked Wylie, moving aside. The men's eyes grew round as they distinguished Eirene crouching in the shadow behind him.

"It will be very difficult to take the lady such a long way through the streets," mused the sergeant. "Has the Bimbashi Bey no friends in the Greek quarter?"

"I am staying with Professor Panagiotis," said Wylie.

"Oh, the chief of the Greeks! That is well, unless his house is one of those destroyed. We can soon see."

The soldiers opened out, and Wylie and Eirene took their places in the midst. The sergeant, stalking just ahead, conversed with Wylie over his shoulder. Ever since their meeting in the north, he and his men had been sent hither and thither to places where

outbreaks were expected, but the outbreaks always occurred in the districts they had just left, or, as now, had been allowed to come to a head instead of being nipped in the bud. Every one had been expecting this particular outbreak for days, or even weeks; he declared. It might have been entirely prevented, but some one must have been heavily bribed. Undoubtedly it was all due to the representatives of the Powers, who with one hand egged on the revolutionists to their outrages, and with the other held back the Roumis from punishing them as they deserved.

Argument of this kind did not admit of much reply, and Wylie attempted no defence of the action of the Powers, which had certainly not been marked by any particular success. They were now in the Greek quarter, and scared faces peeped at them from upper windows, while every door was fast shut. Arrived at the end of the street in which Professor Panagiotis lived, they found a cordon of soldiers drawn across it, guarding a carriage which was waiting ready to start. About the middle of the street, a gap in the row of houses dark against the sky showed where the Professor's dwelling had stood. The sergeant questioned his colleague in charge of the guard, and found that they had been detailed by the Vali to escort the Professor home, as his life was considered to be in danger, but on arriving they discovered from the neighbours that the house had been destroyed almost simultaneously with the first explosion—that at the Seignorial Bank. The Professor was now examining the ruins, to see whether any of his property could be saved, but in a few minutes he was to be escorted to the city gate, and set safely on his way to Kallimeri.

"This is most fortunate," said Wylie to Eirene. "I will make bold to offer you the shelter of the Professor's villa instead of his house here, and you will meet the Teffanys again. They are longing to see you."

"Teffany? Oh, you mean Maurice and Zoe. I always think of them as Smith. I should rejoice to meet them again, but not—not like this." Eirene looked down at her torn clothes and ruined shoes. "It would not be proper—becoming. We are not now in the mountains."

Wylie laughed involuntarily. "They must have seen you in much worse trim often in the mountains," he said. "Why is it improper now, if it wasn't then?"

"The circumstances are different," she said, flushing. "They know now who I am. I cannot thrust myself upon them and ask help. At least we were all in the same plight in the mountains."

"I can relieve your mind on one point, at any rate. There's no question of thrusting yourself upon them, for they are most anxious to see you. I have a letter from Miss Teffany for you here, if you can see to read it, and I was charged in addition to use all the arts of diplomacy to persuade you to visit Kallimeri, if only for a day, and even if you had to be accompanied by Madame Ladoguin."

"You really mean it?" she asked, looking up at him doubtfully. "You are not saying it merely to make me willing to come? You may not quite understand, but it is a tremendous step for me to take. I mean, if the Ladoguins choose, they may say—things about me, and I may be cast off entirely—if I don't go back to the Consulate at once, you know."

Wylie cut short her halting utterances. "Don't be afraid," he said kindly. "You shall go back to the Consulate as early as you like to-morrow. To-night you simply can't get there. Slander itself could say nothing against your accepting a night's shelter from your father's old friend and his wife. Now, will you get into the carriage and read your letter, while I go and look for the Professor? You will promise me to wait here until I come back?"

Much to his relief, Eirene uttered no protest, and the idea which had occurred to him that she might slip away when his back was turned, and lose herself in the mazes and dangers of the streets, had evidently not entered her mind. She was too much exhausted by all she had undergone to have energy left to make plans for herself, and it was an untold relief to find her movements settled for her. Gratefully she accepted Wylie's help, and entered the carriage, receiving Zoe's letter from him with a word of thanks, and leaning forward eagerly to read it by the light of the sergeant's lantern. Her piteous little white face, as she looked up at him in utter bewilderment of fatigue, was in Wylie's thoughts as he passed the cordon to find the Professor, and it made him very determined to obtain success in a task which he foresaw, though without exactly knowing why, would have its difficulties. He met the Professor returning to the carriage, and condoled with him on his losses.

"Oh, it was only to be expected," was the philosophical reply. "It would have been something of a slight if I had been left unmolested on such an occasion. Of course, the miscreants hoped to benefit themselves,—I hear there were a dozen Jews raking over the ruins almost before the fire had ceased, under pretence of helping to save my possessions,—but I

need not tell you they found nothing. We shall save nothing of the furniture or contents of the house, unfortunately; the destruction was too thorough. Two or three bombs must have been used, I should say, and remarkably well placed. The caretaker's wife, who escaped, tells me she noticed a very tall woman, whom she suspected to be a man in disguise, hanging about just at dusk. Well, we had better get back to Kallimeri. I am sorry it is no use looking for your bag, if that was your reason for coming down here."

"Never once thought of it," said Wylie, detaining him. "No, I have picked up a European lady in distress, and I want to take her back with us. There's nothing else to be done."

"Who is the lady?" asked the Professor sharply.

"The Princess Eirene Féofan."

"I suspected as much. No; let her go back to the Scythian Consulate. I have no responsibility for her."

"She can't. The streets are impassable. You knew her father; you can't refuse her shelter."

"I will have nothing to do with her. Do you realise that she is a Scythian tool, the only person whose right to the Greek Imperial crown approaches—in some eyes even overshadows—that of Maurice Tefany? Let Scythia look after her own candidate; my interests are diametrically opposed to hers."

"Professor," said Wylie, a bright idea seizing him, and enabling him to choke down his indignation, "you can't deceive me. Don't try to tell me that the same thought isn't in your head as in mine. The game is in your hands, and it's no use trying to persuade me that you think of throwing away your advantage. If you can get the Princess to Kallimeri, and marry her to Tefany, you and he are both made men."

The Professor drew in his breath with a hissing sound. "He might be," he said. "I should be left out."

"Oh, nonsense! when both of them would owe you a debt of gratitude ever after for having brought them together? Why, it would give you the strongest possible influence at once."

The Professor considered the matter, and it was evident to Wylie that he was weighing the merits of various courses in his mind. Like Maurice, the soldier had the unpleasant feeling that in the Professor's cogitations his wishes or arguments had little part. The issue would be decided by considerations far less obvious.

"Your idea is excellent," he heard at last, with sensible relief. "Such a marriage would at once checkmate Scythia, and strengthen enormously Mr Teffany's position. I will represent the propriety of it to him as soon as we reach Kallimeri, and there need be no difficulty with the lady. She will be in our hands."

"Are you mad?" demanded Wylie, seizing him again by the arm as he turned quickly towards the carriage. "You can't be serious in proposing to put pressure upon the Princess. Why, Teffany would become your enemy for life. The Princess comes to Kallimeri purely for refuge, and incidentally to see her old friends before returning to Scythia. If Teffany can induce her to stay, it's all right. Otherwise, we must take her back to the Consulate to-morrow."

"That will be too late," muttered the Professor. "The streets will be clear again, and she will pass safely."

"Look here," said Wylie; "let me give you a word of advice. You and I are men of the world, and know

exactly how much and how little you mean when you say things like that. But it would not sound well to the Teffanys, and they might believe you meant it. Do you see?"

The Professor signified reluctantly that he did, and asked, "Then what is the good of taking the Princess to Kallimeri?"

"Simply to bring them together. If Tefany wants her, he won't let her go again, after his sister and I have piled up the agony about endless separation and the dangers that will surround the Princess in Scythia."

"Ah, and what interest have you and Miss Tefany in the affair?" demanded the Professor, severely.

"Miss Tefany hopes to gratify her brother, who would have come into Therma to-day to try and see the Princess, if I had not insisted on coming instead. My only interest is to gratify a wish expressed by Miss Tefany."

Baffled by the 'unmoved tone, Professor Panagiotis went on towards the carriage, where Eirene, tired out, had fallen asleep in her corner. Wylie presented the Professor to her, and gave what money he had with him to the friendly sergeant, to distribute among his men, before taking his seat. The soldiers who had formed the cordon surrounded the carriage, and they drove slowly towards the gate nearest Kallimeri. Many streets were blocked with the ruins of houses which had been destroyed, in others fires were raging and troops forbade passage, in others the search for revolutionists was still being carried on, to the accompaniment of shots and shrieks, others again were empty, save for rigid forms prone in the shadow of the houses. At the gate, the Vali's seal, exhibited by the officer of the escort, obtained them a speedy

passage, and the soldiers convoyed them through the environs of the town until they were safely on the upland road leading to Kallimeri. Then the escort was dismissed, the driver was at length allowed to whip up his horses, and in the wild, headlong style dear to him and his tribe they rattled up to the villa.

"Oh, what has been happening?" cried Zoe, rushing down from a point of vantage beside the gate. "We have seen explosions, and the most dreadful fires—not the ordinary kind that happen every night, but whole streets must have been burnt. We were all so frightened. I have been watching here for hours."

"That was very dangerous," said Wylie, his heart leaping, nevertheless. He had jumped out of the carriage to meet her, and the Professor and Eirene, the latter still slumbering, had driven on. "If a revolutionist had been hanging about ready to blow up the villa, he would have killed you, lest you should give the alarm."

"But in that case I shouldn't have been much better off in the house," said Zoe flippantly. "It was revolutionists, then—who have been blowing up the town, I mean? So you were not able to deliver my note, I suppose?"

"Wasn't I?" said Wylie triumphantly. "Why, I've brought the Princess back. She's in the carriage."

"In the carriage? Eirene? and you have kept me walking slowly here! What will she think of me?"

"Wait one minute," said Wylie, as Zoe quickened her pace to a run; "I'm very proud of myself for the way in which I did your errand, for I have had to employ all the resources of diplomacy to overcome the Princess's objections to coming here, and the Professor's objections to having her. But we must

manage to rush things a bit to-morrow morning, for she means to go back."

"And if she does, we may as well give it up, for she will be out of our reach," said Zoe. "Clearly we must precipitate matters. Oh, but how did you know what I was hoping for?" she cried suddenly. "I never told you."

"I guessed, from what you told me about your brother, and then it came to me in a flash that we might get things settled at once, thanks to all this affair in the city. Nobody knows where the Princess is, you see, and it'll take some time to track her."

"You mean they could get married before she is found? Oh, how splendid! We must manage it. I will think about it to-night, and you must play up to me to-morrow."

"Trust me!" said Wylie, as they arrived at the door, where Madame Panagiotis, a very correct German lady of commanding proportions, was looking with evident suspicion at Eirene, with her bare shoulders and tattered evening gown. With a cry of delight the two girls rushed into each other's arms, and on Zoe's guarantee, Madame Panagiotis consented to receive the dishevelled-looking stranger. There was a room next to Zoe's she could have, she said, and she herself would lend her decent clothes, unless Miss Tefany cared to do so. Zoe declared joyfully that no one else should look after her friend, and carried her off upstairs at once, pausing only to say aside to Wylie—

"Just tell Maurice, as you pass, that she is here. Then perhaps he will be able to sleep."

Returning to Eirene, she found the Professor saying pointedly how glad he was to receive under his roof a younger branch of the illustrious house to which his

honoured guests belonged, and she swept her off at once, afraid that he might go on to say something that would spoil her plans.

"Isn't Madame Panagiotis funny?" she asked of Eirene, when they were by themselves. "Maurice and I used to wonder whether she would sit on the floor and eat with her fingers, and you can imagine our feelings, when we found her such a monument of propriety. Do you know, the Professor called her at first 'the Mrs Professor' when he talked English—*die Frau Professorin*, you know—but he must have seen it sounded queer, and he gave it up."

Eirene sat listening passively while Zoe took down her hair and brushed it. "Oh, Zoe," she broke out suddenly, "it is such a rest to be here. I don't mind any one else—Professor or Professorin—if I can be near you and Maurice. You can't guess how I have longed for you!"

"It's awfully sweet of you to say it," said Zoe, penitently. "I know I was perfectly horrid to you often."

"You weren't!" was the indignant reply. "You and Maurice were always just the same to me, whether you thought I was Miss Smith or a Princess. You were quite right to scold me when I said silly things. And, Zoe, you were right about Vlasto, and I was too silly. He was Nicetas Mitsopoulo, Chariclea Ladoguin's brother, in disguise. I recognised him as soon as he was presented to me, and I thought how you would triumph. I deserved it."

"At any rate, it's quite new for us to be paying each other compliments. And have you brought the girdle of Isidora with you?"

"Oh no, how could I? I did not dare to carry it in my dress any longer, because of the maid. Do you

know, Zoe, they were so anxious that I should send it as a peace-offering to the Empress? Chariclea and her brother both hinted at it. But I would not do it. It seemed like buying back her favour by giving up my rights—your rights, too. I found out a hiding-place for it, but I don't know whether it's safe. Perhaps they will discover it this evening while I am away, and send it to Pavelsburg, pretending that it comes from me!"

"Well, if they do, you can't help it," said Zoe. "Let it alone for to-night. Are you frightfully tired, Eirene? There are such a lot of things I want to ask you. Look here, let us bring your bed into my room, and then we can talk without disturbing any one till we go to sleep. I know Maurice will want you all the morning."

Loss of sleep, and her adventures of the evening, did not seem to have told on Eirene's spirits when she appeared the next day. Zoe had dressed her hair low to hide the cuts and bruises received in the explosion, and she looked very pretty in a white gown, which Zoe surrendered to her heroically, though she had just had it made for herself to replace the horrible German ready-made garments with which she had been obliged to content herself on reaching Therma. The two girls were sitting in the verandah looking into the inner courtyard of the house, when Wylie, already primed for his part, brought up the steps first an armful of cushions, and then Maurice, and established him in a long chair.

"Could I speak to you a minute?" he said to Zoe, as they had agreed, and she went to the other end of the verandah with him.

"I really have something to say," he said. "It's quite impossible for the Princess to get back this

morning. Firing is still going on in the town, and they don't think things will quiet down until fresh troops arrive, which won't be till to-night. What do you think of my riding in and asking the Ladoguins to send a proper escort for her?"

"It would provide the necessity for decision, which is what we want," said Zoe gravely. "I will call her away to write a letter to Madame Ladoguin when it is time for you to start. Perhaps they will have settled things before that. I shall leave them to themselves for the morning, as soon as I have explained to Eirene that she must stay here till she is sent for."

"Won't that be rather pointed—leaving them to themselves, I mean?" asked Wylie solicitously.

Zoe gave him a look of pity. "I shall stay here," she said. "If they talk loud, I can hear them, and join in, but if they choose to talk low, I shall work quietly."

"I suppose I mayn't come and share your vigil?"

"No, your company would be too distracting. I must be unobtrusively on the watch, you know."

Wylie departed without a murmur, possibly a little to Zoe's disappointment, and only returned, equipped for riding, about two hours later.

"Now for it!" said Zoe. "I must take my courage in both hands. Shall I save the situation, or shall I ruin it?"

"But don't you think it's all right by this time?"

"Not a bit. Every now and then I have heard what they said, and it was always 'Do you remember?' like children talking over a Sunday-school treat. I might have sat with them the whole time. Well, now to interrupt them. Doesn't it make you feel a brute?"

"Not in the least, nor you either. You know per-

fectly well that you feel like a whole three-volume novel; or a goddess out of a machine, or anything else that annihilates time and space to make two lovers happy."

Zoe looked at him critically. "You mustn't thought-read to such an extent," she said, "or I shall be afraid of you. It's uncanny. Now I am going to make the plunge. Eirene, are you ready? Captain Wylie is waiting to start."

"Start? Where to?" demanded Maurice.

"For Therma, of course, to take Eirene's letter. If she is to get back to-night, she must be sent for."

"With these outrages still going on, when she has barely escaped with her life already? Nonsense! she can't go back."

"I can't stay away any longer," said Eirene.

"It's awfully hard that you should just get this one glimpse of us, like a condemned man saying good-bye to his friends, and then go away for ever," said Zoe.

"Why should she go away at all?" said Maurice suddenly. "Zoe, give us two minutes more. And just tell Wylie, will you? Eirene," as Zoe vanished, "do you want to go back?"

"I must," she said, smiling at him bravely.

"Can you bear to go back? I can't bear you to go."

"But I must," she murmured, trying to draw away her hand.

"Oh no, you needn't, if—Eirene, I know it will sound frightful cheek to you, but I must say it—if you would marry me."

"You are sorry for me," she said quickly, "because you know I am no longer the heir."

"I never thought of it. I am sorry for you, but only because it's so rough on you to give you the



alternative of taking me or going back to a life you dread."

"I suppose you understand," said Eirene with energy, "that if I went back to Scythia I should be replaced in my old position, and be rich and received at Court?"

"Yes, I know, and I can only offer you a country life in England—for certain. Anything else is mere possibility."

"Do you imagine I am thinking of that? I want to be sure you do not say this out of pity."

"But I do. I want you to take pity on me."

Sunshine succeeded momentary dismay on Eirene's face.

"You know," she said softly, "there was a condition to be fulfilled before I could be received at Court again?"

"That you should marry some one, I suppose? Who is the brute?"

"Oh no, they would not say that in words. The condition was that I should write to ask forgiveness, and say I was sorry for running away."

"Well, and did you do it?"

"No, I would not—because I am glad, glad, glad, that I ran away. If I had not—"

"Yes?" Maurice had her hand fast by this time.

"I should still have been a rebel, opposing the head of my house," said Eirene demurely.

"We might even have been pitted against one another," said Maurice, with equal solemnity. "By the bye, have you gone into my claims at all?"

"No, they are yours, and you believe they are just—that is enough," said Eirene.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THROUGH ANOTHER MAN'S EYES.

"WELL, did I play up to you?" asked Wylie, finding Zoe in the verandah the next day.

"You did, indeed. Your booted and spurred impatience was most telling. I'm sure it woke Maurice to a sense of the desperate nature of the situation, and so brought about the happy result. Don't you feel proud of your first attempt at match-making? I do."

"You were the match-maker; I only acted under your orders. What am I to have for it?" demanded Wylie.

"A promise of further employment if your services should at any time be needed," said Zoe, with unnatural coolness, looking round desperately for a way of escape.

"Oh, here are Maurice and Eirene, released at last from their conference with the Professor!" she cried, with real relief. "Well, what have you settled?" as they came up the steps, Maurice obviously quivering with excitement, Eirene reluctant and blushing.

"Everything!" cried Maurice triumphantly. "No, Eirene, I'm not going to shout or chortle, or do anything I promised you not to, but I must tell these two, because they'll have to know, and we want Wylie's help. Where are you off to, Wylie? Come back at

once. You are our stand-by, our victim, our resource, as you have been all along."

"Didn't know you'd want me," muttered Wylie, returning, and Maurice perceived that they had arrived at an inopportune moment, but was wise enough to take no notice.

"We want you tremendously," he said. "I must tell you that Eirene is behaving like a brick. She is willing to marry me as soon as ever it can be arranged. It's a proof of confidence I should never have ventured to ask of her, and if ever I fail to justify it, I hope you two will just talk to me as I deserve." He took Eirene's hand gently in his, and she gave him a smile which was not far removed from tears, and then drew back into the shadow behind him, unable to meet the eyes of the others. "You see," he went on, "it will save us no end of bother if we can only get married before the Ladoguins can track Eirene. It seems that the Professor made it right with the soldiers who escorted you here, and the gate-keepers, so that no one will know there was a lady with you, and most happily, no one will dare to make inquiries openly, lest it should be asked why Madame Ladoguin didn't take better care of her charge. The Professor thinks that when they find no trace of Eirene near the wrecked carriage—for, of course, the Roumis who attacked her will say nothing, for their own sakes—they will give out boldly that she was killed in the first explosion. We can't let that remain uncontradicted, for the sake of her claims, but it will be much safer if she only comes forward again as my wife."

"Look here," said Wylie, "I don't want to spoil your pleasant arrangement, but where is the danger from Scythia now? The Princess is of age; how can any one prevent her from marrying you if she likes?"

"What's to keep them from saying that she's under age, or mad, or anything?" demanded Maurice. "We could call for an inquiry, but she wouldn't be allowed to remain with us, and you ought to know, if any one does, how hard it would be to get at her if they once got her into their hands again. And besides, they could bring such pressure to bear that no Greek priest in the world would dare to marry us."

"I should like to join Maurice's Church," explained Eirene softly to Zoe, "but he thinks it would be such a good example for the Emathians if they saw that people of different creeds needn't necessarily quarrel."

"Poor thing! Is he offering you up as a political sacrifice already?" said Zoe.

"But, I say," said Wylie hastily, "you seem to forget that a religious marriage isn't enough. You'll certainly need a civil ceremony as well, if not two. Do you propose to drive up to the Scythian Consulate and request Ladoguin to perform his duties as registrar?"

"Scarcely," said Maurice, "though for a long time we couldn't make out how we were to manage without his services. A declaration that we were Sovereign Princes and could legislate for ourselves would hardly meet the case. But, happily, Eirene has remembered that her father never surrendered his Dacian nationality. When he went to Scythia he held on to his estate in Dacia—I suppose to have something to fall back upon if things went wrong—and now it belongs to her. The simplest thing would be for us all to migrate there, and be married by the village pope and at the British Legation, but the trains are sure to be watched, however unobtrusively. So we must take advantage of the nearest spot of Dacian ground, which is their Consulate in Therma. The Professor is on the best of terms with the Consul, for Dacia has not so far joined

in the scramble for influence in Emathia, and sides rather with the Greeks than any one else. No doubt she hopes to have her reward some day, but that doesn't signify now. There's a church quite close to the Consulate which is regarded as their special preserve, so we can have both ceremonies complete."

"The Princess will be married fast enough, but I'm pretty sure you won't," objected Wylie.

"I shall be if the British Consul or acting-Consul is present, and registers the marriage," said Maurice. "The Professor has been looking it up. Now, Wylie, this is where you come in. We want you to get round your friend Sir Frank Francis. The best of it is"—Maurice's voice became unsteady—"that if the Ladoguins have told him anything about Eirene's disappearance, he'll suspect *you* of having carried her off, and of wanting his kind offices for yourself. So the first thing you'll have to do will be to disabuse his mind on that point. Then you must swear him to secrecy, and tell him the real state of the case. Tell him nothing would have induced us to patronise the rival establishment if we hadn't felt certain that, if we came to him, his conscience would have driven him to give Ladoguin an opportunity of forbidding the banns. As it is, he is only asked to attend at the Dacian church and Consulate, and register the marriage of a British subject in the usual way. If he feels that even that is too much, ask him to take a day off, and appoint his chief clerk acting-Consul for the occasion."

"But if he won't, what is to happen?" said Zoe.

"Why, we should have to escape in a half-married condition, and find a less Scythia-ridden British Consul. But Wylie must put things so movingly that he won't have the heart to refuse. After all, I am the head of Eirene's family, and who has the

right to arrange for her marriage if I haven't? And if I choose to marry her myself, instead of handing her over to some one else, and she doesn't object, who has any right to prevent me?"

"All very well," said Wylie. "It sounds most logical and convincing, but you know there are a good many people who both could and would prevent you. Don't be afraid; I'll exhaust my eloquence on Sir Frank, and if nothing else will bring him, I'll persuade him it's his duty to be present to make sure that I am not marrying the Princess after all. Well, consider the ceremony safely accomplished. What next?"

"Next we are to be very snobbish, and send detailed announcements of our marriage—showing that it means the union of the elder and younger branches of the descendants of John Theophanis—to the principal papers of the world. Also, Eirene is to announce it to the various royalties whose acquaintance she enjoys."

"And where are you to be when the announcement bursts upon the universe?"

"At home, I hope, for our honeymoon. The Professor seems inclined to allow us a breathing-space. I can't quite make out what he's up to, but apparently he thinks of nothing at present but getting the wedding over. I fancy winter is a close time in Emathia, too. I should like to show Stone Acton to Eirene, and we should be out of the way until the fuss had blown over."

"Well, I hope you mean to apply for police protection," growled Wylie.

"Or import a detachment of Pinkerton men from America to garrison the house, with instructions to shoot at sight any foreigner who appears in the village," suggested Zoe.

"And what next?" persisted Wylie.

"That's what I can't quite make out. Eirene's got an idea that the Professor has in his mind's eye—or even in his actual possession—some fortified island in the Archipelago, where we might practise sovereignty, so to speak; but that makes him a sort of benevolent magician, and I can't quite fit it in with the other things I know of him."

"Oh, but it's such a delightful idea!" cried Zoe. "You would stay quietly in your island when nothing particular was going on, and when adventures were going to begin, you would be close at hand. But you must be sure and let me know whenever that is, and I shall come from the ends of the earth."

"But what are you proposing to do?" demanded Maurice.

"My dear Maurice, allow me a little liberty. You didn't expect me to trail about after you and Eirene, did you? I have so many plans that I don't know which to carry out first. I am going to write my great book, and to pose as a Balkan expert in literary society, and to travel all over the world."

"Oh, well, I daresay circumstances will make the decision for you," said Maurice, with a significance which Zoe recognised and resented. There was a touch of defiance in her rejoinder.

"On the whole, I think I shall choose the literary part first. I shall shut myself up, and write and write; but every now and then I shall pounce out on unhappy people who think that the Emathian problem is a simple one, or who make mistakes in spelling Balkan names."

"But who is going to accept you as a critic?" asked Maurice.

"Every one," triumphantly. "I have the one great qualification. I have failed in literature."

"But I thought you were going to succeed now. You'll find yourself in a glass house—a mark for all the other critics."

"Maurice, I have had to tell you before that you were dense, but I am sorry to have to repeat it in Eirene's presence. When my success has come—as soon as ever I am sure of it—I shall start upon my travels. In Tibet or the Sahara I shan't be bothered by what people are saying about me. I shall have quite enough to do with taking care of myself."

"I am sorry to break in on these blissful dreams of the future," said Wylie, in rather a forced voice, "but the fact is, my extended leave is nearly out, and my time here is limited. How soon am I to intimate to Sir Frank that his presence will be required at the Dacian Consulate?"

"This day week," returned Maurice promptly. "Eirene is pledged not to protest, and the Professor has promised to get her the Patriarch's blessing as a reward."

"Then I shall just have time to see you through. I sail in the afternoon."

"If there's any risk, we'll put the wedding earlier," said Maurice. "Don't mind my feelings; tell me if it's necessary. I must have you to support me."

"Oh, you'll have Armitage."

"I shall have Armitage anyhow. The Professor says two best men are necessary. But you I must have—as better best man, I suppose." So let me know the worst, or I'll keep you back by force, and get you cashiered."

"Oh, that'll be all right," said Wylie, compassionating Eirene's blushes. "I hope you realise what a lucky fellow you are, and that the Princess won't let you forget it."

"How could I forget it, when I have got her?" demanded Maurice. "He talks treason, doesn't he, Eirene? Let us depart in dudgeon, and leave him and Zoe to plot the subjugation of Sir Frank. No, Zoe, we don't want you. I am surprised that a person of your discernment should try to make a third in the walks of an engaged couple. *You're not the only one in the family to take up match-making,*" he added in a whisper, as Zoe sat down again, somewhat discomposed. But the emergency put her on her mettle, and she turned to Wylie with smiling coolness as Maurice and Eirene went down the steps into the garden.

"It's delicious to see them looking so happy, isn't it?" she remarked. "It makes one feel quite choky."

"Doesn't it make you feel that such perfect bliss ought to be infectious? Don't you think you and I——"

"Oh no, please don't!" she cried.

"What am I not to do?"

"Don't say it. I like you tremendously, of course, and I think you are the most splendid friend any one ever had, but I want to travel about for ever so long, just as I like, and write, and be in things, you know."

"Then you haven't been in things enough ~~the~~ last three months?"

"I should think not! It has only whetted my appetite for more. Things are so frightfully interesting. I should like to plunge right into the midst of life."

"Is it absolutely necessary to take the plunge alone?"

"Oh, I know what you are going to say. But don't you see that I want to be without responsibilities for a time? I have always had Maurice on my mind, but now I can hand the dear boy over with an easy conscience to Eirene, and do just as I like. I want to be

able to shut myself up and write, or start off on my travels, and go on, or come back, or break my journey, just as the fancy takes me—not to have to feel that I ought to be doing anything whatever.”

“You would soon get tired of that sort of life.”

“So everybody would say, but I want to try it. But you are better than most people. You are the only man I ever met who wouldn’t have been scandalised at what I have said, and done everything to keep me back.”

“Perhaps I know better than to say all I feel. Or perhaps I am trying to allure you by a deceptive show of sympathy. Honestly, Zoe, your life shouldn’t be a dull one if I could help it—with me, I mean,” he added lamely. “And you can’t think I should try to stop your writing. I should be awfully proud of your books.”

“I know. It’s very nice of you to say it, but you don’t understand. Think of me stuck down in a small Indian station——” Wylie opened his lips, but closed them again. “You told me long ago you were to be stationed in a horrid, humdrum little place when you went back. Nothing would happen, there would be the ~~same~~ dull, deadly monotony of duties every day—and yet I couldn’t have a writing fit in peace. It isn’t even as if you were still on the frontier.”

“It’s rather a good thing I’m not, if your feelings would be liable to change the moment I was transferred anywhere else. But I should have thought a quiet, regular life would have been the best possible thing for your writing.”

“For manufacturing books, not for writing. Why, just think, if I woke up one day with a perfectly splendid idea, and wanted simply to sit down and work it out—not to bother about meals or anything,

except coffee and biscuits, or something of that kind, which I could eat without thinking about it. You would come—I know you would—and sweep my books away ruthlessly, and insist upon my taking proper food, and expect me to be grateful to you for doing it!”

“And I should be disappointed? Well, I will try to moderate my expectations. It might come to our both having scratch meals, surrounded by books, at opposite corners of the table.”

“No, you would never get like that, and it's quite right you shouldn't. You would have your duties, demanding punctuality and regularity, and all the things I want to escape from for a time, and you would insist on them. It would be different if you were more easy-going.”

“I'm afraid the woman who marries me will have to take me as I am—unless she can change me. Zoe, take me in hand, won't you? I'll give you a free hand to make all the alterations and improvements you like.”

“But it's just those very qualities that I like in you. No, you won't see. When—I mean if—I marry, I shall really do my duty and settle down. If I went back with you now, I should sink my own life in ~~yours~~. I should think of nothing but seeing that your meals were in time and as you liked them, and that the house and everything did you credit, and you would congratulate yourself on having driven all my foolish aspirations out of my head. And then one day I should wake up to find that I was growing old, and had done nothing, and the visions had faded, and I should—*hate* you. No, I shall never be young again, I shan't always feel my heart leap up with a great idea coming suddenly—I must follow the gleam while I can. It will be different in a few years, but at

present I have such lots of interests, and I can't narrow them all down to——"

"To one man and his career? Well, put it that you spend these years as you suggest. What then?"

"Why, whether I succeed or fail, I shall have tried my wings, 'proved my soul,' like Paracelsus. Perhaps the visions will fade naturally, perhaps they will be more under control. Then I shall have time for the other side of life."

"In other words, you might be willing then to turn to the man who loved you and had spent his best years waiting for you?"

"You are trying to make me out perfectly horrid! I—I——" Zoe blushed and stammered—"I shouldn't mind very much being engaged, if it was quite certain that the engagement was a long one."

"But I should. Do you really expect me to go on working quietly, not knowing where you were, or in what wild scrapes you might be involving yourself? Suppose you were again in circumstances like this summer's. Another man is thrown with you, as I have been, falls in love with you, as I have done; you discourage him steadily, as you have discouraged me, but he forces an explanation—also like me. You plead that you are already engaged. 'Why, what kind of double-distilled fool can the fellow be, to let you run about by yourself like this? He can't care for you much!' And it would be perfectly just."

"I have said more to you than I could ever have imagined I should say to any man on earth," said Zoe resolutely, but with a tremor in her voice. "If you won't wait, it is not for me to offer concessions. Why are you so impatient?"

"Because life is short and apt to end suddenly, I suppose. What's the good of talking, Zoe? I

want you, and you don't want me, and that's all about it."

"Oh," said Zoe impulsively, "when you talk like that, I have a feeling as if I saw your real self for a moment. The rest of the time you seem not to be putting forth all your strength. If you did, I—— What is it?"

"It is just that. I believe that if I looked you straight in the eyes, and said, 'Come,' you would come. I could make you listen to me, but I won't. I don't want my will merely to triumph over yours; I want your sober judgment to decide that you care for me enough to give up everything else, no matter what, for my sake, and not regret it."

Her puzzled face was a mute request to him to go on.

"Remember what I have learnt, since I knew you first, about your brother's future prospects. The Professor has been rubbing it in diligently. If Tiffany's claims were once recognised, or even influentially taken up, think of the gulf between you and me. Married to a poor and undistinguished soldier, you would be heavily handicapped; free, you could aspire to almost any position. Unless you really loved me, heart and soul, you must feel that I was a drag on you, and resent it, and I—I could stand anything but seeing you repent that you had married me."

"Oh, how unkind you are!" cried Zoe. "As if anything that could possibly happen could make me change! Why, if I were a princess, and you came in as a stranger, I should step down to you and hold out my hand."

"And I should kiss it and pass on."

"You are cruel. Don't you see how terribly I should be wanting you if I did such a thing as that?"

Oh, promise, promise, that if I ever do it you won't pass on!"

Wylie laughed bitterly. "What a queer girl you are!" he said. "Your eyes are full of tears at the mere thought that you may want me some day, and yet you won't take me now."

"I was feeling it as if it was in a book," murmured Zoe shamefacedly. "But you will promise?"

"No, I won't, because I shouldn't do it. I shall do my level best to forget you from the day I leave this."

This was high treason, and cried aloud for condign punishment.

"Can you forget when you like?" asked Zoe incisively.

"No, I wish I could! It won't be much comfort for me, away in the Soudan, to think of you wandering about the world and getting into all sorts of difficulties."

"The Soudan? But aren't you going back to India?"

"No, I am to be lent to the Egyptian Government for special work in the Soudan. That was how I got longer leave."

He went away abruptly, and Zoe gazed after him with mingled feelings.

"Of course we shall meet again," she said to herself. "It's all nonsense about forgetting. He can't forget if he really cares. And we shall be older then, and more tolerant, and get into one another's ways better." A vision crossed her mind of herself and Wylie placed farther apart by the passage of years, both more fixed in their own ways and opinions, each finding it more difficult to understand the other, but she brushed it aside. "I have a right to live my own life, just as

he has a right to try and get me to live his, if he can. I wonder whether he could have made me marry him, as he said? It would be hard to refuse, I know, if he had looked at me. I—I almost wish he had tried. And why didn't he tell me about the Soudan until just at the end?"

She wondered in vain, but Wylie vouchsafed enlightenment later to Eirene, who felt that her own engagement supplied a vantage-ground from which to stretch out helping hands to those who were less fortunate in their love affairs. With the gracious little air of condescension which she had now laid aside in Maurice's case, she took Wylie to task.

"The Soudan is just what Zoe would love," she said. "You should have told her about it sooner—quite at the beginning. Why didn't you?"

"Because I didn't want her to marry me merely as a purveyor of adventures."

"You are a very rude man," said Eirene, with dignity.

"Sorry," said Wylie. "It's not the first time you've had that against me, is it?"

"But it makes me unhappy that you should manage things so badly, for you are the very person for Zoe."

"You mustn't flatter my self-conceit by agreeing with me. She doesn't think so, you see."

"Oh, but she will, some day. Don't think me meddling, prying"—she blushed—"but you won't suddenly marry some one else in despair, will you?"

"There won't be much chance of marrying any one where I shall be," he said, looking down at her kindly, "so I can reassure your mind by saying that it's in my work I hope to forget all this."

CHAPTER XXV.

"POUR MIEUX SAUTER."

MAURICE and Eirene were married. In the little church of Hagios Gerasimos, Maurice the servant of God had been crowned for Eirene the handmaid of God, and Eirene the handmaid of God for Maurice the servant of God. They had drunk of the Common Cup, walked in procession round the church with the crowns held over their heads by the groomsmen, exchanged wedding-rings, to Maurice's surprise and gratification, and they had been dismissed with the blessing of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel. Sir Frank Francis was duly present to register the marriage. Wylie had again displayed his diplomatic powers by laying siege first to Lady Francis, whose fertile imagination, defying probabilities and dates, swept her, as soon as she heard his story, to the wild conclusion that he had been wooing Eirene for his friend during those trying weeks when he had maintained so assiduous a watch on the Scythian Consulate. Even when approached through the person who might be presumed to know his weak points best, Sir Frank was not easy to persuade. His promise of secrecy prevented his revealing everything at once to M. Ladoguin, but he declared long and loudly that he would have nothing to do with any clandestine,

hole-and-corner business. It was by working on his feelings of sympathy for Eirene that his wife at length extorted his consent. The poor girl would be indubitably married; was it to be thought of that her bridegroom should be bound only by honour? Once away from Therma, he might or might not repeat the ceremony before a British Consul, and was it just to subject the bride to such a risk? Maurice would certainly not have recognised his own character had he heard Lady Francis expatiating on the danger of Eirene's too probably finding herself a deserted wife, and Wylie was filled with grim amusement when the injustice of it occurred to him; but the natural desire of an honest man to see that a young fellow did honestly by the girl who trusted him carried the day over Sir Frank's sense of his duty to his colleague. Two stipulations he made, which were promptly accepted, namely, that he should see Eirene alone before the ceremony, in order to ascertain her true wishes and make sure that she was not breaking any former contract of betrothal, and that on the day after the wedding he should be allowed to make a clean breast of the matter to M. Ladoguin.

The arrangements of the wedding-day were curious, for though the wedding itself was obliged to take place in the morning to allow Wylie to be present, the ship in which the bridal pair and Zoe had taken their passage for England did not sail till the evening. Accordingly, after the ceremony Armitage escorted Wylie to his steamer, and the rest of the party returned to Kallimeri, Eirene wearing Greek peasant costume and passing as the maid of Madame Panagiotis, for there was to be no relaxation of vigilance until they were safely at sea. Zoe was in specially high spirits, accusing the bride and bridegroom of

sharing the sense of depression which is usually believed to settle down upon a wedding-party after the departure on their honeymoon of the chief actors.

"Stuff!" said Maurice. "Why, my wedding-ring alone would keep me from being depressed," regarding his hand proudly. "It's really awfully swagger. Makes a man feel so undeniably married, don't you know?"

"Oh, that's all very well," said Zoe. "It's no use trying to wear a mask before me. You forget that I have an advantage which no other living bridesmaid possesses. I am like the Infant Phenomenon, going away with Mr and Mrs Lillyvick on their wedding tour. Have you read 'Nicholas Nickleby,' Eirene? Not? What a lot of things we have to teach her, haven't we, Maurice?"

"There's one thing I should like to teach you, and that is to know a good man when you see one," growled Maurice.

Zoe turned upon him. "If you think you are doing Captain Wylie any good by the way you have behaved to me all this week, you are very much mistaken," she said. "Any one would think I was a child who didn't know her own mind, instead of a reasonable being, acting deliberately. I told him exactly how I felt, and he understands. He doesn't wish to marry me while I feel as I do; he said so. And now I hope you will leave off treating me in this absurd way, as if I was in disgrace, and allow me the liberty I allow you."

"Oh, Zoe, Maurice didn't mean that!" cried Eirene anxiously. "He was only so sorry for Captain Wylie."

"I hope, Maurice," said Zoe, unappeased, "that you realise how detestably you have behaved, when

you see that it's necessary for Eirene to interpret your intentions to me."

She left the verandah with great dignity, but found herself confronted by Armitage on the steps.

"Oh, are you back already?" she cried. "Well, did you see him off?"

"Yes, the steamer was actually punctual; we had barely time, in fact. He begged me to give his farewells and good wishes all over again. I only stayed to watch him out of the harbour, and hurried back here, because I thought Mrs Teffany might let me make a sketch of her in that Greek dress. It's awfully fetching, and I shan't have another chance."

Armitage was to wait until the next steamer, so as to cover the retreat of the rest, or rather, to find out if any measures were likely to be taken against them. What his paper thought of his long delay at Therma he did not inquire, trusting to be able to placate it with a ferrific double-page drawing of the city on the night of the dynamite outrages, as seen from Kallimeri, as well as by a whole supplement illustrating the adventures of his friends, whose capture by the brigands had first brought him south.

"If you would stand just as you are now, leaning against that pillar, Mrs Teffany," he continued persuasively. "You see, I have your husband in Greek dress already, and I could work up the two sketches into a tremendously telling portrait."

"I bag it, then," said Maurice. "All right, Eirene, let him do it if he's taken that way. It's only like being photographed at an ordinary wedding."

"It ought to have been a group," objected Zoe, whose anger had evaporated before the duty of arranging Eirene so that her costume showed to the best advantage. With skilful fingers she pulled out

here and patted down there, until Armitage begged her not to make the effect too studied.

"Talking about groups, we really ought to have had one taken before Wylie left," said Maurice. "Just the four of us who were captured together. He always seems rather left out, and yet he worked so tremendously for us."

"Oh, that reminds me," said Armitage. "I can't help thinking"—he went on, with some embarrassment—"at least, I know I should like to be reminded if it was my case. It doesn't seem quite fair to Wylie—You know he paid your ransom?"

"No!" cried Maurice. "I thought my bankers did it. Why, this explains the apologetic, self-congratulatory letter they wrote to me this week. I was too busy to bother about it, but I was going to ask for an explanation when I got home. Wylie paid, you say?"

"I believe the Professor raised some of it." But I know Wylie scraped together fifteen thousand, by selling out every shilling of his investments, and mortgaging the little place he has in the north. You see, your bankers had refused to advance the money, and the brigands had sworn to kill you if it wasn't forthcoming."

"But why in the world has he said nothing about it? What a set of ungrateful brutes he must think us! Oh, I say, this is the rankest thing I ever heard!" cried Maurice, tramping about the verandah in his perturbation.

"Why, you see, the money didn't actually ransom you. The brigands bagged it all right, but Scythia had been beforehand with us, and we might as well have chucked it into the sea. I only found out Wylie's feeling about it just now. He forbade me to say a

word to you—said his pay gave him enough for his wants, and his place would do as well with a mortgage on it as without—but I thought you ought to know."

"I'm jolly glad you did!" cried Maurice. "I feel a perfect hound. After all Wylie has done for us—and everything——"

Zoe had risen suddenly and gone down the steps, her face resolutely turned from the rest, her hands clenched until the nails made deep marks in the palms. A rush of overwhelming shame, unavailing regret, had swept over her. Stiffly she walked along the garden paths, guiding herself instinctively, her head held rigidly, her eyes seeing nothing. Presently, in the shelter of a clump of bushes, out of sight of the verandah, Eirene caught her up.

"Oh, Zoe, don't look so dreadful!" she entreated. "He must know you didn't know."

"There are strange punishments for such," came harshly from Zoe's lips. "It's only what I deserve."

"But," suggested Eirene timidly, "Maurice will pay him back. He won't really suffer."

"It's not that. It is that he could do it, and say nothing, even when—— Oh, Eirene, you don't understand, you can't understand. Be thankful you can't. You didn't shut your heart against love; you took it and were thankful. I chose to live my own life, and I have got it."

"But if he really cares——" ventured Eirene, with increasing nervousness. "Oh, Zoe, I don't like to say it, but if I could do anything——?" An angry flush rose to Zoe's face, but faded quickly.

"No, you can't. He knows me now as I am, you see, and it would be no use. You understand, Eirene, there is nothing to be done—nothing whatever. Swear that you won't try anything." Eirene promised hastily.

"Just let me alone for a little. I should like to go out somewhere and howl, but that would attract attention. Leave me alone here and go back to the others. I shall be all right presently."

Eirene obeyed, the more readily that the sight of Zoe in this mood frightened her horribly. A sense of duty had made her follow her, but she ran back gladly to the verandah and Maurice. He met her below the steps, and she nestled close to him.

"Oh, Maurice, I am so glad I have you!" she whispered. "It is horrible to be a woman alone, even if you can't help it."

Into the meaning of this cryptic utterance Maurice did not inquire, but it was some little time before he rearranged the floating odds and ends of the Greek dress, and led her up the steps into the field of view of the patient Armitage, demanding sternly what she meant by running away when she was sitting for her portrait. She was posed afresh against the pillar, and Armitage went on with his sketch, but it seemed that fate was warring against its completion. Only a few strokes had been added when Professor Panagiotis appeared on the verandah and invited Maurice's attention.

"It is rather a serious matter, though the cause is a trifling one," he said. "Perhaps you would prefer to discuss it privately?"

"I knew we were not married enough!" groaned Maurice. "Wylie always said we ought to have four weddings at least, and we have only had two and a half—counting Sir Frank's presence as the half. Well, Eirene, you're just as much concerned as I am, so you had better come. Put in some background or something, can't you, Armitage, while we're gone?"

The Professor ushered them into his private room

with some ceremony, as though to remind them of the position they held in his plans for the future. On the table lay a document written on parchment in Greek characters.

"It was about this that the slight difficulty arose," said the Professor. "I thought it well to draw up a brief statement of the circumstances of your marriage, with the signatures of the witnesses, in view of possible developments. One copy you would take to England and place among your family papers, the other I would either entrust to the custody of the Œcumenical Patriarch or put in a safe place of my own, as you prefer. In these days of dynamite, one can never be sure that some night the British and Dacian Consulates will not be blown up simultaneously, and both the original registers destroyed. I have the signatures of the Consuls, you see, but unfortunately Papa Sotirios, the old priest whom we chose to perform the ceremony on account of the simplicity of his character and his detachment from politics, makes a difficulty. You noticed, of course"—turning suddenly to Maurice—"that you were described in the service as 'the Orthodox Prince Maurice, son of Theodore,' just as your bride was termed 'the Orthodox Princess Eirene, daughter of Nicholas'?"

"Not I," said Maurice. "I knew it was Greek he was reading, and of course I grasped the general drift, but I couldn't follow his pronunciation a bit." Eirene's eyes were anxious.

"Well, it is really very troublesome and absurd," said the Professor, in hearty, paternal tones, "but it seems Papa Sotirios observed that you did not venerate the ikons on leaving the church, and when I saw him afterwards, he insisted on knowing whether you were truly Orthodox. It sounds ridiculous, but actually,

in the hurry of arranging for the wedding, and the difficulty of doing so without arousing notice, I never thought of mentioning that you had not yet joined the Greek Church. Your name disarmed suspicion, and the Patriarch sent his blessing, as Papa Sotirios performed his office, in ignorance of your schismatical standpoint."

"But does that vitiate the marriage?" cried Maurice. "Nonsense! of course it can't. The civil ceremony in the presence of the two Consuls can never be upset."

"Oh no, quite so," said the Professor hurriedly. "Nothing can touch the validity of the marriage. But in the eyes of the people, you see—well, any informality about the religious ceremony——"

"Would the marriage not have been allowed to take place if it had been known that I was not a Greek?" demanded Maurice.

"Well, it is true that, strictly speaking, mixed marriages are forbidden. Of course, the prohibition often yields to special circumstances. And as the marriage has taken place, I don't see that its religious validity could be questioned. It is merely that we ought to avoid the slightest suspicion of any informality in your case. You must remember that Prince Christodoridi will be on the watch for any flaw in your title from the moment you come into the public eye."

"But according to him, my title is nothing but a series of flaws, by what you told me at first. You said he would declare every foreign and non-Orthodox marriage in my family a bar to my succeeding."

"Exactly, but—there is a further consideration. From that point of view, the Princess, your wife, has now contracted a heterodox marriage, and therefore

loses her right of succession, the only one incontestably superior to Prince Christodoridi's."

"Well, but what's to be done?" cried Maurice, after a pause of dismay. "We must be married over again, I suppose. But no, that would be no good, and you say they wouldn't allow the wedding to take place. I have always known that my rights were not worth much if the bigots got the upper hand, but I can't let my wife lose her rights through me. I suppose you have something to suggest?"

"A very simple and practicable expedient, happily. You have only to announce your adhesion to the Orthodox Church at once. A brief renunciation of the errors of your former schismatical creed, and a profession of faith—equally short—uttered in the presence of Papa Sotirios and other accredited witnesses, will put everything right."

"But how? I don't see——" began Maurice.

"The conversion and the marriage will have taken place on the same day," said the Professor, patiently and impressively, "and it will naturally be accepted that the conversion came first. The priest will be glad to fall in with the wishes of so distinguished a convert, the Consuls can say nothing either way, as the subject was not broached in their presence, my silence may be relied on. The Princess's claims are safe, while yours are infinitely strengthened."

"But I have no intention——"

"It will merely be anticipating a step which you must have taken eventually, and which will come from you now with a much better grace. No one not belonging to the Orthodox Church could be considered as a serious candidate for the heritage of John Theophanis."

"And yet you have invited me to consider my-

self a serious candidate without saying a word about this?"

"The thing was so obvious that no mention was needed. It was certain that the necessity would force itself upon you as soon as you considered the question at your leisure." The Professor's tone was bold, but his eyes were shifty.

"Well, it hasn't. What's more, the exact opposite has. If I had felt any drawing towards the Greek Church before I came to Emathia, what I have seen would have altered my views. My object is to unite the Emathian Christians, not to accentuate their divisions. To throw myself on the side of the Patriarchists would make every Slav in Emathia my bitter enemy. Why, I would almost rather turn Exarchist, as my wife is already enlisted on the Greek side."

"A heterodox Emperor is no Emperor," said the Professor, with deadly meaning.

"A good many of my ancestors were not particularly Orthodox," said Maurice drily.

"All the Christians in Emathia—Greeks and Slavs alike—would unite against the heretic who dared to aspire to——"

"I'm very glad to hear it," Maurice broke in. "First time in their history they ever united for or against anything. I should have achieved a triumph. But I don't believe they would. If they have never united against the Moslem they would scarcely do it against me."

"Are you so false to your race that you could bring yourself to adopt a neutral, even a hostile, attitude towards it?" cried the Professor. "Are our sufferings, our sacrifices, our efforts towards emancipation, clogged by the dead weight of the sullen indifference of the Slavs, nothing to you?"

"I think the Greeks are getting hard measure at present, undoubtedly, but it's only what they have given in the past. Your ignorant, avaricious priests and self-seeking Bishops and Patriarchs have much to answer for in alienating the people upon whom they were forced. Your men of letters have stifled all culture but their own, and they have their reward in a population bitterly hostile to Greek and ignorant of everything else."

"Mr Teffany," said the Professor angrily, "this is very fine, but it is not business. It is absurd to think that the party I represent will consent to throw its influence on the side of a candidate who derides its most cherished institutions and ideals. I ask you plainly, are you prepared to join the Orthodox Church and accept whole-heartedly the Hellenising programme of the Greek party in Emathia, as the price—if you choose to call it so—of its support of your claims?"

"And I answer you plainly,—I am not."

"Don't decide hastily," urged the Professor. "You may not be aware that since your rescue I have made some progress in sounding the representatives of the Powers on the subject of your claims. Sick of the clamour for reform, and the slight success of the steps already achieved, they did not turn an unfriendly ear. A Christian Governor-General, with the support of the most influential section of the population assured to him, ought to succeed, and the neutral Powers seemed to think so. There remain Scythia and Pannonia. Scythia never fights against the inevitable; you are far more likely to suffer from her patronage than her hostility. Pannonia cannot afford to be outdone in unselfish magnanimity by Scythia. In fact, the signs are so favourable that we cannot pause. If you desert

us, we must press the claims of Prince Christodoridi, whose way will be cleared by your destruction of the claims of the Princess, your wife."

"Eirene," said Maurice, "do you want me to secure your rights at the Professor's price?" His tone was harsh, and Eirene knew the reason. He could not be sure which side she would take. She responded to the unuttered appeal.

"Not at the price of your conscience." Do what you feel is right. Our claims remain as just as they ever were."

Maurice's hand sought hers in the joyful assurance of confidence not misplaced. "My wife and I are agreed," he said. "We maintain our independence."

"I am sorry to hear it, but there is no more to be said. You have chosen your own course, and you know the consequences——" The sentences shot out venomously.

"Most certainly, but we hold ourselves at liberty to take any steps that may commend themselves to us in support of our rights. We are still the heirs of John Theophanis, and both the common law of Europe and actual Byzantine usage are on our side. Come, Eirene."

They left the Professor moodily gnawing the end of a penholder at his table, and once outside the room, Maurice put his arm round his wife. "You know I would rather have cut off my right hand than married you if I had known what you would lose by it," he said.

"Maurice," she said quickly, "you know I don't mind. If you had yielded to him, it would have destroyed all my faith in you. I was afraid—oh, dreadfully afraid for a moment, that you would do it for my sake, but something seemed to keep me from

saying a word. And now I am glad. But you don't see"—she broke into something very like hysterics—"that even what he wanted you to do would not have put things right. It would only have been a trick, a dishonest compact between you and him and the priest. I should have married a schismatic after all!"

"By Jove, so you would!" cried Maurice. "The Professor's too deep for me. Why, he would have had us completely under his thumb. If we had kicked, he would only have had to hint that the priest's conscience was becoming uneasy about his share in the business, or that he himself could give Prince Christodoridi an important piece of information if he liked, and we should have had to cave in. Little girl, we have not only told the truth, but shamed the—tempter!"

"My native land—good night!" said Maurice impressively, looking back from the deck of the steamer at the semicircle of twinkling lights which represented Therma.

"A long, a last adieu!" said Zoe, not without regret.

"Not a bit of it!" said Maurice. "We're only going to recruit our strength for further efforts."

"My dear boy," said Zoe solemnly, "Cambridge ought to reject you with ignominy, and Oxford gather you to her bosom with tears of joy. You are a lost cause in yourself."

"I'm a made man," declared Maurice, feeling Eirene's hand creep sympathetically into his. "I came out with an open mind and a sense of duty. Now I have a wife whom I have robbed of her rights. Clearly I am bound in honour to recover them for her."

THE HEIR

"Men always say that it's women who lose sight of a cause in an individual," said Zoe sententiously.

"I don't quite follow you, Zoe. I am the cause—the lost cause—you said so just this minute; and Bruce is the individual. Oh, I see—and we are one. That's all right."

THE END.

